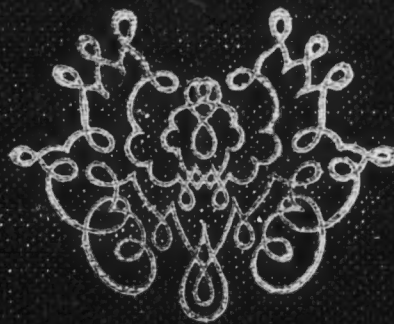


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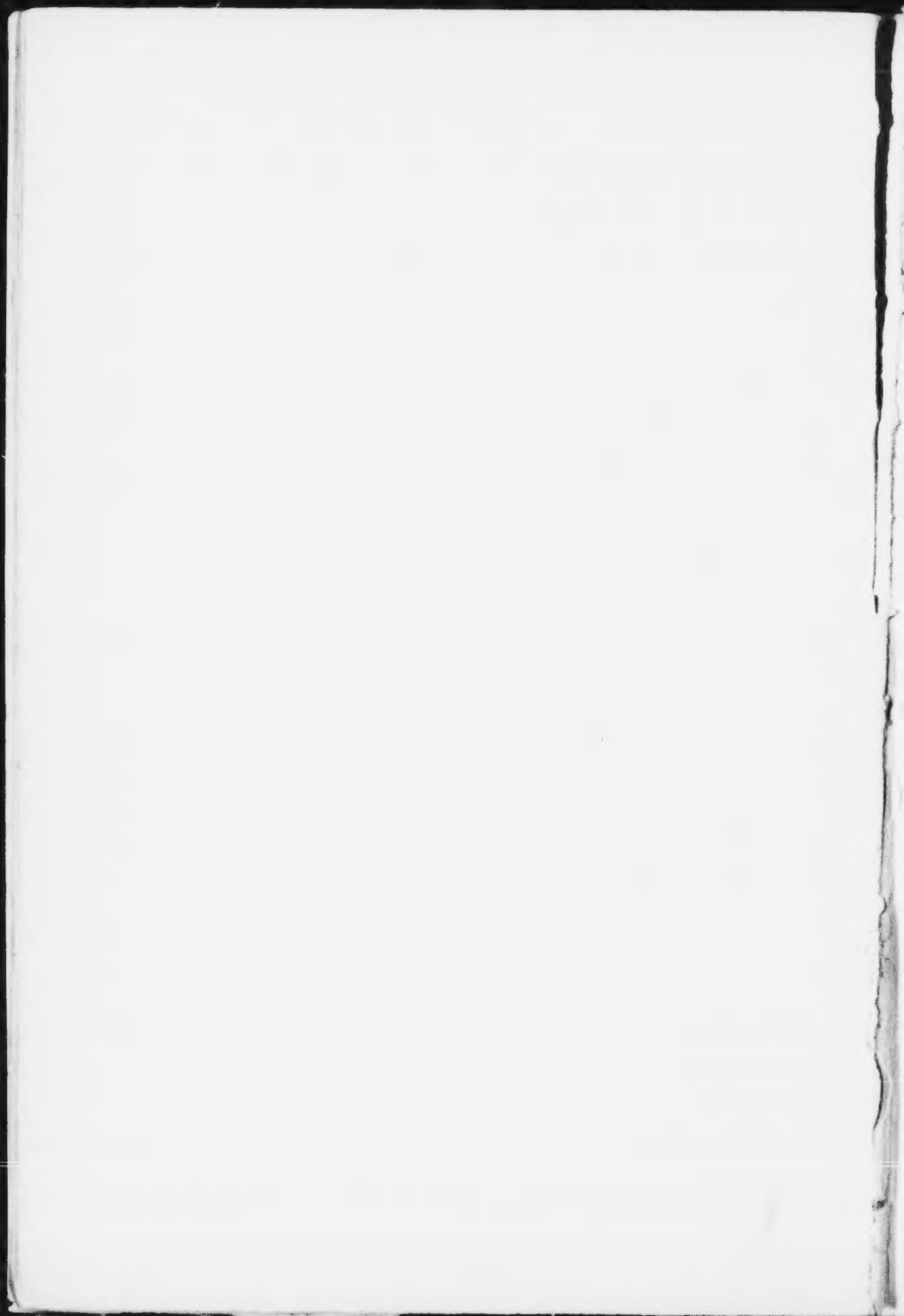
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TO
MY DAUGHTER
LYDIE.



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THE FOURTH DIMENSION

CHAPTER I

MISS JESSICA YEO TASTES BLOOD

I

JESS peeped through the tiny hole in the curtain, and saw the rows of faces familiar to her from childhood. Upon most of them lay an expression of bland expectation, tempered, possibly, by the reflection that time rather than money was wasted by good-natured persons who patronised amateur theatricals. Seats in the first six rows had been sold at five shillings apiece ; all other chairs in the house were priced at half a crown ; the benches, upon which, during school hours, uneasy urchins wriggled, held the unprivileged at a shilling apiece. The house was full and overbrimming before Jess peeped at it.

The third row, on the right of the central gangway, had been taken *en bloc* by the Yeo family, and Mr. Yeo sat at the gangway end, monumentally impassive, as became an Indian Civil Servant of high rank now retired on a handsome pension. After the first act, he would slip away to finish his

article on "The Rise in Value of the Rupee." Next to him sat Mrs. Yeo, exchanging smiles with members of the Squire's party, who filled the row across the gangway. The brothers and sisters of Jess, a maiden aunt, and two cousins waited patiently for the curtain to rise. The sister nearest in age to Jess looked sulky, because a small part had been taken away from her. Two of her brothers, as potential actors, had not survived the first rehearsal. And this poignant fact barbed the inevitable conclusion: "We Yeos can't act for nuts." Jess was well aware that all the members of her family were prepared for disaster. At the back of her alert brain rankled the conviction that a break-down on her part would be acclaimed boisterously. Even her father, whom she respected rather than loved, would say with finality: "We are not mummers." Probably he would add: "Thank God." When she left her mother, that kind lady had whispered: "Don't be nervous, darling, if you forget your lines, as you're sure to do, it doesn't really matter. On these occasions people are so kind to the failures." Jess was tempted to reassure her mother. Instinct told her that she would not fail. But she remained silent, nodding her pretty head.

Ranging further afield, her eyes rested upon the parson, a new-comer and a bachelor, not as yet "accepted" by the Silurians of his parish. Beside him sat an elderly man, grey-haired, delicately featured, faultlessly turned out. His face was so familiar to Jess that she wondered why his name had slipped from memory. Who was he? The parson entertained queer friends at times. Some of them,

to the scandal of the village, were non-Churchmen, flaunting knickerbockers or flannels on Sunday morning. This grey-haired Adonis must have stayed at the Vicarage before. As she stared at him, he smiled in answer to some remark of the parson, and instantly Jess became more puzzled than ever. The smile, so illuminating, left her still in the dark.

She turned for information from the hole in the curtain to the leading lady of the play.

"Who is the man sitting next to Mr. Lang?"

The leading lady peeped, and a sharp exclamation escaped her rouged lips.

"My dear, it's Sir Felix Crewe. How perfectly awful!"

Jess gasped. She had never seen the great man in the flesh; but his counterfeit presentment on picture postcards and in the illustrated papers was delightfully and intimately familiar. And, actually, he had made the fortune of the play selected for this special evening. It had run for some four hundred nights at his theatre.

Her first feeling was one of rage against the parson. How cruel to bring such a man to such a show . . . ! Already, she perceived, the leading lady was on the verge of collapse. What would be the effect on the leading man? Did he know? And, if not, could the heart-breaking, nerve-racking truth be hidden from him till the curtain fell on the last act? These thoughts were fluttering through her mind, when she heard the leading man's voice.

"I say, do you know who's in front?"

The leading lady's voice quavered, as she replied :

" I have just made the appalling discovery—Felix Crewe."

" Why appalling ? "

Jess stared at the hero of the comedy. Was this mere " swank " ? A certain amount of " swank " from a gallant hussar who had been wounded in the Great War might be pardoned. And he was Second in Command in Sloden-Pauncefort, the eldest son of the Squire. The leading lady answered :

" I'm scared stiff. Aren't you ? "

The hussar laughed.

" Certainly not. I never thought much of his performance. You can't get away from it, he's not quite a gentleman, and this part ought to be played by a gentleman. Given that . . . it plays itself."

" Of course, if you think you can teach him something . . . ! "

The hussar laughed again.

" What I mean can't be taught." He turned to Jess. " Have you ever seen Crewe act, Jess ? "

" Never."

" Clear the stage ! "

The sharp injunction from the unhappy producer of the comedy, unhappy because he knew that his very raw material had not been licked into shape, sent Jess to the wings trembling with excitement. Nevertheless, although poised for her first flight, she was oddly able to take a bird's-eye view of the past. She had never seen Crewe act ; she had never heard Melba sing, or Mark Hambourg play. Such wonderful treats had been promised, eagerly anticipated, before the War, when a thick pigtail hung below her waist. They were part—in her opinion the greatest

part—of “coming out.” And, instead, she had remained in Sloden-Pauncefort, a V.A.D., for four barren years. She was now twenty-two.

The curtain went up.

An empty stage provoked enthusiastic applause.

A creditable start was made. Jess, of course, was not experienced enough to know that lack of technique extinguishes prematurely the ordinary amateur. He or she—particularly he—is so anxious to shine brilliantly that the oil in the little lamp is burnt out probably at the very moment when full illumination is needed.

In this case, much to her surprise, the hussar, a bit of a thruster, cut down the field. Jess decided that the presence of Crewe had “gingered” him up. Having a sense of humour, not fully ripened, it amused her to reflect that George was bent upon showing a star how to twinkle. George dashed hither and thither to the utter confounding of the leading lady. As he put it, after the first act, a bit had been kept up his sleeve. Jess wondered whether it occurred to him that all this introduction of new business was unfair on the others. At polo and cricket, George played for his side; in the hunting-field he showed himself considerate for others. Why this amazing change?

Her own part was quite colouriess. At the first rehearsal, the producer had said to her, tactfully: “You can’t make much of your lines. And if you could, the psychology of the comedy would be upset. Try to play naturally, without emphasis, without gesture.”

She had obeyed him, recognising the fact that the

author intended her to be an anæmic foil to the leading lady. Faint praise was her portion: the curt nod of approval from the producer, and his equally curt "I'm not worrying about you."

The curtain fell on the first act.

Not having to change her frock, Jess peeped through the curtain. Mr. Yeo rose majestically and left the room. Jess wondered whether Sir Felix Crewe could stick it out. Finally, she decided that having, so to speak, imposed the burden of his presence, he must stay till the end. He actually looked as if he were happy, thereby, in Jess's eyes, proving himself to be a consummate actor. The parson, evidently, was keeping his distinguished guest to himself. They talked together during the interval, but not—so Jess decided—about the performance. She wondered if she could get speech with him, after the show. Mr. Lang was a friend of hers, a good fellow. Dared she write him a note?

The second act dragged a bit. George, having shot his bolt, took a back seat. The leading lady gripped opportunity, adopting George's self-advertising methods. The engineer was hoist with his own petard. The producer scowled savagely over his prompt-book, as he whispered to Jess:

"Disgraceful performance—disgraceful!"

Fortunately, his opinion was not shared by the audience. The house thundered applause after the second act.

In the third act, George "dried up." By the luck of things he was "on" with Jess. He had to make a longish speech, somewhat platitudinous, the sort of thing that the playgoing public always

expected from Crewe, and which he alone could deliver without boring an audience. Jess knew this speech by heart, simply because George invariably made a mess of it. When he stammered and broke down after the first few lines she knew that he was dead and buried unless a miracle took place. No ordinary prompting could save him. Jess leapt into the gulf of silence. She picked up his lost words, and at the right moment allowed him to join in and finish the apostrophe. Very few suspected what had taken place. In five more minutes the comedy was over.

Jess was putting on her hat, when the parson joined her. He said pleasantly :

"Sir Felix Crewe wishes to congratulate you."

In a sort of dream Jess adjusted her hat, and followed the parson into the auditorium. Her own people nodded as she passed them. She could hear the unspoken comment : "Jess has worried through all right." The quality had split up into groups. She caught the Squire's genial tones : "Yes, we have begun cubbing. Killed a brace yesterday."

A second later, her hand, limp with excitement, was held firmly by Crewe. His finely modulated voice fell, as if from an immense distance, upon her wondering ears :

"You are a remarkable young lady. It may interest you to know that once I dried up at almost the same place."

"You?"

"I had been playing the part night after night for more than a year. That is the dangerous time. The whole thing becomes automatic. At the

moment—when I broke down—I was thinking of my next production. And my words went. Nobody had the wit to save me. And yet, your part was being played by an accomplished actress."

"What did you do, Sir Felix?"

"What I always do. I coughed, sauntered across the stage to the prompt side, got my cue and went on with the speech. Well, I congratulate you upon what *you* did. I was tremendously impressed."

He smiled at her, and bowed.

II

Afterwards alone in her bedroom, Jess thought of the many things she might have said, but didn't. The great man's kindness and the sincerity that informed his voice, had "dried her up." But she could remember a few more never-to-be-forgotten sentences.

"You played your small part admirably. You were absolutely natural, a great achievement. Once more—my congratulations."

Jess went back to a mother more concerned with a belated supper than an excited daughter. Nobody knew what Jess had done. At supper, she was told by a brother: "You weren't too dusty, old bean." Mr. Yeo, after wrestling with the rise in the rupee, tapped her cheek, and asked a question. "How is my little Jess feeling after her histrionic efforts?" Her enthusiastic answer: "I'm feeling wonderfully bucked, father," provoked a frown, and raised an admonishing finger. The late Commissioner of Burrahbugpore hoped that his dear child was not stage-struck.

Next day, at tea-time, the producer of the comedy solemnly thanked Jess for saving a situation past praying for. He happened to be a little man, prim in appearance, pernickety in manner, with one ruling passion—the Drama. Having abundant private means, he could devote himself to his hobby, which he rode in and out of season. Once, as Jess was aware, he had financed a provincial company, which, ultimately, came to grief in Exeter. As a young man, he had collected photographs of leading actresses, some of them autographed. During the War he had done his bit by getting up Red Cross entertainments. He had been paragraphed in local newspapers as a brilliant amateur. But he had wit enough to know that, as an actor, he was not brilliant. And now, at the ripe age of fifty-three, he devoted his energies to "producing."

After tea, he led Jess aside. From his manner she divined that great issues were at stake. His congratulations, in the presence of the family, had been whispered. Perhaps they were the more impressive for that. Alone with Jess, out of ear-shot of the brothers and cousins, he still whispered. Call it a stage whisper and you have it.

"I want you, Miss Yeo."

"Want me, Mr. Pell? What for?"

The stage whisper became attenuated.

"I want you for the Christmas theatricals at the Castle."

Jess nearly fainted.

The Christmas theatricals at the Castle bore about the same relation to the Sloden-Pauncefort performance of the previous evening as that which

exists between Fortnum and Mason and the village grocer. Famous amateurs played at the Castle. And, as often as not, famous professionals, when "resting," proffered their services. To produce a play at the Castle had been, for many, many years, the crowning ambition of Mr. Egerton Pell. And, during the War, he had achieved this ambition with notable success. He had "made good." The Duchess of Sloden acclaimed him as a discovery. And, of course, he belonged to the county, a Pell of Pell-Mannering. Professional producers, charging fifty guineas, were not to Her Grace's taste: too autocratic, too hidebound to the traditions of their craft.

Jess had witnessed two performances at the Castle; she knew what was expected of the performers, even the humblest. To be called upon, suddenly, to assist at such an entertainment produced aphasia. She heard Pell's discreet voice:

"I ought, perhaps, to have prepared you."

She remained silent. Pell continued:

"I saw Crewe this morning. You astonished him. Well, you astonished me. I daren't say so in the village; but last night you were immense. Poor George made a scarecrow of himself. Our leading lady is not good enough to carry a flag in a Christmas pantomime. Bar you, I never handled such a collection of puppets. In your tiny part, you shone. How did you do it?"

"I don't know," faltered Jess.

"Light is in you. I never believed that *cliché* about all women being actresses, although it may be true enough that all women try to dissemble.

My trouble is that they will try to act when I ask them to behave naturally. Last night, you walked on as you walk into your mother's drawing-room; you sat still; you became somehow the idiotic, colourless nonentity that you were intended to be."

"And which, possibly, you thought I was?"

Mr. Pell smiled.

"And which I know, to-day, you are not."

Jess blushed with pleasure.

"And then, when that ass dried up, you rose to heights. Crewe used the adjective 'superlative.' You saved the situation by using George's words. That was a big thing; but the way you did it was illuminating, because you kept your grip of your own part, repeating his lines like a parrot, as if you had heard him say them idiotically, which, of course, he always did. That showed me that you could act, and act with intelligence. Now—I can offer you a very fat little part, full of possible laughs. The audience will applaud if you look as solemn as an owl. If you play for a laugh you lose it."

"Mr. Pell, I couldn't do it—really."

He replied testily: "Now you are dissembling; you can do it; and you will do it."

"If my people will let me."

"Good Lord!" He stared at her in astonishment. "You must know that your people will simply purr with pleasure. You'll stop at the Castle for a full fortnight."

Jess had never stopped at the Castle. And her father, a notoriously dangerous shot, was not invited to shoot there. More, the Yeos were only invited to the *omnium gatherums*, when—so it was

whispered—small articles of great value, like miniatures, which could be slipped into a muff, were discreetly locked up. Upon such occasions, Mrs. Yeo might find herself confronted by the pushing wife of the local auctioneer.

Jess said hopefully: "I believe they would let me act, if you made a point of it, Mr. Pell."

"I'll tackle your mother at once."

"That's sweet of you; but father will have the last word."

"I'll tackle your father."

"Please; he made a very good tea."

III

Meanwhile, alone with the maiden aunt at the tea-table, Mrs. Yeo was commenting, maternally, upon the unexpected appearance of Mr. Pell. What had brought him to The Cedars? As the nephew and heir of old Sir Jocelyn Pell, he was, of course, welcome in any house within a ten-mile radius of Pell-Mannering. Devoted mothers deplored Mr. Pell's celibacy. If he remained single, a James the First baronetcy would cease to be . . . ! The maiden aunt hazarded the conjecture that Mr. Pell had not dropped in to talk over the theatricals. Why had he so markedly led dear Jessica into the rose-garden?

Mrs. Yeo was positive that roses in September presented no claim upon Mr. Pell's attention.

The maiden aunt went a step farther. Mr. Pell, during tea, had looked at Jessica with undisguised admiration. She added pleasantly: "In his prime, my dear Clarice, still on the sunny side of fifty."

"Oh, yes."

Both ladies knew Mr. Pell's age accurately; but even the hypercritical will admit that sunny years lie between fifty and sixty.

Mrs. Yeo observed quietly: "Jess has not talked about Mr. Pell to me."

The maiden aunt, an authority on all matters of the heart, said sharply: "Surely, Clarice, that is an excellent sign. Long ago," she sighed, "when my own affections were engaged, I hardly dared to admit the fact, even to myself."

Mrs. Yeo replied pensively: "Such delicacy of feeling is obsolete, dear. Modesty went out when mixed bathing came in."

However, after more talk, both ladies agreed that Mr. Egerton Pell's visit had romantic significance. At the risk of being indiscreet, it must be recorded that Mrs. Yeo called her sister's attention to the neglected state of the nurseries at Pell-Mannering. They indulged, too, in some speculation concerning Sir Jocelyn's tenure of life. The maiden aunt whispered that a recent indisposition of the aged baronet was really a slight stroke . . . ! Time slipped by till Mr. Pell entered the room alone. He asked if he could venture to disturb Mr. Yeo, in a tone that indicated suppressed excitement.

His manner—so the maiden aunt affirmed afterwards—was distinctly jaunty. He confessed, with a twinkle in his eye, that he had left Jess in the garden.

Mrs. Yeo said majestically: "Your wish to speak to my husband concerns Jessica?"

"It does. How clever of you to guess!"

"Ah!" she smiled graciously, as she rose from the tea-table.

"In that case, I shall disturb the lion in his den. He is at work on an important article."

"Indeed. Perhaps to-morrow morning . . . ?"

Mrs. Yeo became arch. She was aware that elderly Romeos were subject to chilling reactions.

"No, no; Mr. Yeo will be delighted to give you a few minutes."

She sailed out of the room. The maiden aunt murmured sweetly: "Little Jessica is no ordinary girl."

He replied emphatically: "She is not."

IV

When Mrs. Yeo entered the lion's den, the king of beasts growled at her:

"I told you that I was not to be disturbed."

"Mr. Egerton Pell wishes to see you."

"Damn Mr. Egerton Pell . . . ! I can't be bored by him. By the way, did we go to Burrahbugpore in September or October?"

"I can't remember the month. It was on a Saturday. I refused to move in on a Friday. Now, dear, please give me your attention. You must see dear Mr. Pell."

"Must? Why—why?"

"Because he is about to ask your sanction of his engagement to our little Jess."

Mr. Yeo laid down his pen, and stared at the faithful consort of thirty years. Upon matters that intimately concerned him and his he was

shrewd enough. It never occurred to him that his wife might be mistaken. And he recalled the remark made by Jess at supper: "I'm feeling wonderfully bucked." Obviously the affair was cut and dried. As a carpet-bagger, he was sensible that Jess might well be bucked over the capture of a Pell of Pell-Mannering, a fish for which many mothers had angled in vain.

"Bless my soul, the man's old enough to be her father!"

Mrs. Yeo riposted cleverly:

"Long ago, I believe, my dear father made the same remark about you."

Mr. Yeo acknowledged the thrust with a nod of his massive head. It was difficult for him to realise his own age, inasmuch as he had remained fit and strong when contemporaries were wheeled about in Bath chairs. Shaving himself in the morning, noting with satisfaction clear skin and eyes, he might reflect: "I am past seventy, but I don't look it or feel it." And Mr. Pell might well affirm as much in regard to his age. He, too, was fit if not strong, likely to make old bones, small but sound. A judicial habit of mind took into instant account that a handsome pension expired with the late Commissioner of Burrahubgore. Life insurance would provide for the widow adequately, no more.

"Send him in," said Mr. Yeo.

Obviously, he was not "bucked."

As Mrs. Yeo turned to the door, he held up his hand.

"Wait one moment."

She regarded him smilingly.

"You hinted to me once that there was 'something' between Jess and George Apperton."

Apperton was the name of the squire of Sloden-Pauncefort.

"A boy and girl affair, my dear. They are great friends, 'pals' is the expression used. George, I fear, is fickle. A less artless girl, perhaps, would not have allowed George to slip through her fingers."

"I will see Pell," said Mr. Yeo.

"His Christian name is Egerton." She murmured softly: "Sir Egerton Pell," and vanished. Mr. Yeo shrugged his shoulders.

None the less, so adaptable is the human mind, even to startling changes, that Mr. Yeo, before his visitor entered the room, had reconciled himself to the inevitable and was prepared to accept it graciously. He removed a pile of script from an arm-chair, and took from a drawer in his desk a box of cigars.

Mr. Pell entered, still jaunty, and accepted the chair and a cigar. Quite unconsciously, he was acting, understudying Sir Felix Crewe, whom he held in the highest esteem. A sense of the dramatic never forsook the little man. To him the world was indeed a stage. His sprightly manner would have suggested to an acute observer that, at the moment, he had cast himself for Harlequin. It will not be known whether he regarded Mr. Yeo as Pantaloon.

"I think," he said gaily, "that Mrs. Yeo guessed my purpose in asking for five minutes of your valuable time."

Mr. Yeo nodded. His time was no longer valuable, and he knew it. The fact rankled. It was

exasperating to reflect that from the "county" point of view the undersized heir of Sir Jocelyn Pell bulked bigger than a retired Commissioner.

"Mrs. Yeo is a mother, my dear fellow."

"I should have tackled her, but your daughter persuaded me to speak to you first."

"Just so."

The Producer of Plays hesitated. So far as he could remember, and his memory was retentive of detail, Sir Felix Crewe, in his most effective scenes, never overlooked the supreme value of tactical retreat before strategical advance. He continued tentatively:

"She seemed to anticipate objections on your part."

Mr. Yeo hastened to reassure him:

"Tut, tut! Objections . . .!"

With an ample hand he waved aside objections. Mr. Pell laughed.

"Then all is well. I want her . . . I must have her . . . I think I took her by surprise, Mr. Yeo. She blushed delightfully. That is her great charm—artlessness. And for the moment she was overcome."

"Yes, yes; I quite understand. Jessica is twenty-two, but she remains a child. The bloom of seventeen is still there, thank God!"

"I covet that bloom, Mr. Yeo. I want to exhibit it to a more appreciative audience than we had last night. I can assure you of this—the Duchess will be delighted with her."

Mr. Yeo nodded again. What the Duchess had to do with it passed his understanding. Possibly,

he reflected, his putative son-in-law might be of kin to that august lady, a not unpleasing hypothesis oddly confirmed by what was said next :

" A full fortnight at the Castle would be a necessary preliminary to the great event. I can assure you that there is no suggestion of her going there 'on approval.' "

Mr. Yeo flushed.

" I should think not," he said stiffly. " My daughter . . . on approval ! What an extraordinary idea ! "

" I can assure you it is done. In this case, however, I can stake my own judgment. If I am satisfied, I can answer for the Duchess. "

Mr. Yeo was becoming slightly fogged, but long experience in dealing with Babus had made him patient with prolixity. He said curtly :

" If Jessica is asked to the Castle, she can go. Whether the child has suitable frocks, and what not, is a question beyond my jurisdiction. "

Mr. Pell, accustomed to such questions, answered promptly :

" As to that, Mrs. Yeo mustn't worry. "

" She will. "

" She needn't. Any old thing will do. I haven't gone into that with your daughter, but, I repeat, any old rags will do. "

Mr. Yeo frowned. Jessica had not been turned out, during the War, as smartly as she might have been with a lesser income-tax. At the same time, to allude, however remotely, to her pretty frocks as " rags " was disconcerting and impolite. Before

he could frame an ironical rejoinder the amazing Mr. Pell said coolly :

"Nathan, you know, can do the needful."

"Nathan?"

"The big dealer in second-hand costumes."

Mr. Yeo was not addicted to hasty conclusions, but, at this moment, the conviction overwhelmed him that there must be insanity in the Pell family. He said coldly :

"I waived possible objections just now, but I do object, most emphatically, to my daughter appearing at the Castle in reach-me-down garments."

Then the bolt fell.

"The Duchess goes to Nathan, Mr. Yeo. And, in her part in this play, she, too, wears what I call rags. In fact—but this is between ourselves—the comedy selected for the Christmas theatricals portrays incidents amongst the Submerged Tenth. Your daughter is cast for a coster girl. You may object to that, but I venture to hope you won't."

Mr. Yeo, metaphorically speaking, pulled up his socks.

"I have at last, Mr. Pell, grasped the object of your interview. You want my daughter, *you must have her*, for the Castle theatricals."

"But, of course."

"I am sorry. My time is not very valuable, but such as it is I cannot waste it in futile argument. Jessica, it seems, anticipated objections. I do object. Can I offer you a whisky-and-soda?"

V

Mr. Pell withdrew, according to plan. If he had to argue his point, he preferred to argue with the weaker sex, who, in the end, triumphantly proves itself to be the stronger. He regarded Mr. Yeo as an interesting survival of the mid-Victorian paterfamilias. On the stage, these rather comic characters blustered and bellowed, but, before the final curtain, they surrendered unconditionally.

He returned to Apperton Old Manor, where, for the moment, we will leave him.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Yeo, before seeing her husband, had learned from Jess the disconcerting facts. The poor lady dissembled her chagrin. But hope still bloomed beneath her ample bosom. She refused to believe in Jess as an indispensable adjunct to the Castle theatricals. She was "wanted" because she had inspired admiration in Egerton Peil. This was not surprising. Mothers, in their heart of hearts (to use an expression of the maiden aunt's) take very careful stock of their daughters, when they seriously look them over as fillies entered for the Matrimonial Stakes. Jess had been appraised without fear or favour. She was pretty and intelligent, intelligent enough not to obtrude her intelligence. Mr. Lang, the parson, spoke of her as "receptive." She listened delightfully to young men, like George Apperton, who had nothing particular to say, but insisted on saying it. She was a favourite with older men whose talk might soar beyond her. In pre-war days, so plastic

and charming a creature would have been snapped up greedily.

After dinner, Mr. Yeo always smoked a good cigar. Nicotina made him benevolent.

Mrs. Yeo gave him time to finish his coffee. When she appeared in the "den," she beheld the lion at ease in his easiest chair, stroking his whiskers. He smiled grimly.

"I was had this afternoon."

"Entirely my fault, Alfred. How well you take it! Why haven't we women a sense of humour?"

Mr. Yeo's smile became less grim. Nothing pleases a man without humour so much as to be assured that he has it.

"However, that fellow Pell went away with his tail down."

"I dare say; but he was wagging it when he left me."

"Why?"

"I admit that I misled you, dear, placed you in a false position. But you can trust a woman's instinct. He is after Jess. He hopes that she will play at the Castle, because it means a fortnight of opportunities. Jess has no aptitude for the stage—none. Last night, she was quite out of the picture."

"Um!"

"I need hardly point out to you that if you reconsider your verdict and allow her to go to the Castle, Mr. Pell will, humanly speaking, ask for another interview. The dear child might do worse. Quite apart from that, Alfred, you, with your knowledge of the world, must admit that a fortnight

at the Castle will establish Jess socially. I regard it as better, and much cheaper, than a presentation at Court. Not for the world would I oppose your wishes or your considered judgment, but have we the right to—to burke the child's chances ? ”

Thus Mrs. Yeo, after much talk with the maiden aunt. Mr. Yeo went on stroking his whiskers. Then he spoke with finality :

“ If you put it like that, Clarice, I shall give way. I detest the modern stage and its tendencies. The mere possibility of Jess getting stage-struck fills me with horror. According to you, that possibility is negligible, inasmuch as the child has no aptitude for acting. Still . . . a coster girl . . . in a coster play . . . ! ”

Mrs. Yeo soothed him, for he was much moved. His cigar, indeed, had gone out.

“ The Duke will ask you to shoot. ”

The momentous decision reached Jess as she lay in bed. Mrs. Yeo kissed her, took her hand and pressed it tenderly. In the Yeo family a game was played called “ Swaps. ” Under the unwritten rules of the game, a brother, let us say, who happened to overhear something pleasant concerning a sister, would repeat to that sister what he heard, provided that the sister, in her turn, was able to cap the compliment to herself with another applicable to the brother. A Roland for an Oliver. It was permissible to invent a compliment, if the stock happened to be depleted. Mrs. Yeo, but not her lord and master, entered with spirit into this family pastime. All of the Yeos, with the exception of Jess, may be termed “ cutlet for cutlet ” people.

Champagne was served at The Cedars to those who gave champagne. Port-from-the-wood neighbours never sipped Mr. Yeo's Cockburn '90 and '96.

After telling Jess that her father's objections had been withdrawn, Mrs. Yeo expected and waited for a gush of confidence. But Jess, having nothing to confide, remained exasperatingly silent. Outwardly calm, she was simmering with excitement inside. Mrs. Yeo said gently :

" Mr. Pell has been very kind to you, dearest."

" Hasn't he ? "

" I like him so much."

" So do I."

" I suppose he never talks to you about anything—er—unconcerned with the stage ? "

" Never ! "

Was the little baggage dissembling ? Mrs. Yeo couldn't answer the insistent question. She observed with slight asperity : " He will."

At this, Jess became alert.

" What do you mean, mother ? "

Mrs. Yeo hesitated. According to the lights vouchsafed her, she was a good woman and a devoted mother. By this time she was convinced that Jess was not playing a part. Obviously the War had left her where it found her—an innocent maid. Sweet seventeen becomes too saccharine at twenty-two. Jess must be salted in the interest of all concerned.

" You dear little thing ! I suppose you believe that Mr. Pell only wants you for this play ? "

" But what else should he want me for ? "

" Surely, you can guess."

Jess burst out laughing. She guessed—everything! Having imagination, she envisaged in one instant a wedding at Sloden-Pauncefort; she could hear the bells and the bishop's benediction. There was a bishop in the family, already pledged to tie the knot uniting a pretty kinswoman to the right bridegroom.

"Mother, dear, you are absurd!"

"Whatever I may be, I am not that."

Conviction informed Mrs. Yeo's pleasant voice, and a sub-tinkle of amusement, because it was, indeed, the height of absurdity to accuse her of being absurd. To the maiden aunt she would have admitted certain disabilities, or what were reckoned to be so in the eyes of the younger generation. For instance, she was old-fashioned, with moss-encrusted opinions about domestic servants, the Church Catechism, and the conduct of daily life. She marched leisurely and with dignity in the rear of what we vaguely term Progress. But, fundamentally, she was sensible; taking the world as she found it, and finding it a pleasant enough place if you paid your bills and lived within your income. Her great achievement, as the wife and helpmeet of Mr. Yeo, had been her nice adjustment of ways and means, and her God-given capacity to make sixpence do duty for a shilling. At The Cedars, the face of things shone like a village urchin's Sunday countenance. Absurd persons never scrub the face of things.

Jess apologised.

"Absurd was the wrong word, mother. Naturally enough, you look upon Mr. Pell as a man."

"Pray tell me what he is."

"First, last, and all the time, a producer *o.* plays. He lives for that. He measures everything by that. He doesn't talk about anything unconcerned with the stage, because he can't. I'm sure he thinks in stage terms."

"Now you are getting beyond me."

"I mean this: he ignores the fourth dimension."

Mrs. Yeo gasped; her eyes protruded; her face became red. Who will blame so devoted a mother? She was staring, almost glaring, at a Jess whom she had never seen before, at a Jess who used words quite unintelligible.

"The fourth dimension . . . ?"

"There are only three sides to the stage, aren't there? The missing side is the fourth dimension. In the sense I mean, that missing side includes everything beyond the footlights, and that is the side which Mr. Pell ignores. He doesn't ignore it, collectively, as an audience."

"I can't follow you at all. I have never heard you talk like this. I can't imagine where you picked up this gibberish."

Jess laughed.

"I see. As Mr. Pell would say: I have not 'got over'; that is entirely my fault. I'll try again."

"Please answer my question first. Where did you acquire this unknown tongue which is to me—gibberish?"

Jess answered truthfully: "I have been listening to Mr. Pell. I remember now that I couldn't understand him at first, but patter is easily picked up. Also, I read reviews and notices of plays.

Mr. Pell lent me Mr. Archer's book on play-making. I'm tremendously keen on all that, but I knew it would bore the family, so I kept quiet. Shall I have another shot at explaining Mr. Pell?"

"No, I don't wish Mr. Pell explained. It is rubbish to say that he is not a man. He seems to have posed as a sort of marionette to you."

"Really, mummie, you are not fair to poor Mr. Pell. He's an enthusiast. He doesn't pose at all—never! It comes simply to this. He takes the stage seriously; you don't."

"I don't care how he takes the stage. What concerns me is that he proposes to take you to the Castle. And—why? I have no wish to hurt your feelings, but we Yeos are not mummers. I am sure that your dear father regards all actors as rogues and vagabonds."

"I am sure he does."

"The mere notion of your playing a coster girl revolts him. I persuaded him that Mr. Pell wants you at the Castle for a much more interesting reason. You have a great deal to learn about men. Mr. Pell likes you. Because he likes you, he pitchforks you into a ridiculously unsuitable part. Have you ever seen a coster girl? Can you talk Cockney?"

"Yes, I can."

"What next, I wonder?"

"You know that I mimic people. I can mimic father. That's a small part of one's technique, but it's something. I didn't buck about it at supper last night, but, after the show, Sir Felix Crewe congratulated me on my mild performance."

"Really? Somebody told me he was stopping

with Mr. Lang, who has some very odd friends, I must say. We all thought your performance very mild."

"Yes, it was intended to be so. I don't think I shall disgrace the family at the Castle. As for Mr. Pell, you can believe it or not, as you like; but he wants me to play 'Giggles,' and not for a more interesting reason."

"'Giggles' . . . ! We are to sit still and see you giggling through a long performance. The county will see you. You will be accepted as a giggler. Can you giggle? I forbade giggling in the nursery. I am deeply thankful that none of my girls giggle."

Jess kissed her. She perceived that her mother was profoundly moved; she knew, also, that reversed verdicts, on further appeal, might be turned upside down again.

"Don't worry! I am called 'Giggles' because I don't giggle. I shall be as solemn as father when he reads the Lessons in Church. That ought to be a scream. If I giggle, so Mr. Pell says, I shall lose my laughs. And I'd sooner lose a front tooth."

"How you girls exaggerate . . . ! A front tooth, indeed—and you have such pretty teeth. I hope the county will see *them*. Are you instructed by Mr. Pell to hide your dimples?"

"I shall hide them if necessary."

"*That* I forbid. Well, I must go to bed. You have surprised me very much. I am rather uneasy about you. If Mr. Pell teaches you to ignore what-do-you-call-it . . . ? Yes; the fourth dimension . . . ! By that, I suppose, you mean life—life as it must be lived. If Mr. Pell, I say, in his

enthusiasm for the stage, lures you on to share his ridiculous views, he is no gentleman. Never say that I have not warned you!"

"You are a perfect darling."

VI

During the three months that elapsed between the Sloden-Pauncefort theatricals and the first rehearsal at the Castle, a great event happened with which, happily, we have nothing to do.

The Armistice was signed.

The effect on Sloden-Pauncefort must be recorded briefly. The village lay upon the outskirts of the great forest of Ys, within fifteen miles of pine-clad Avonmouth. Sloden Castle was five miles away, not far from Melchester. In and about the village comfortable houses had been built, cwned for the most part by retired soldiers and civilians. Apperton Old Manor stood aloof in a small park, safely hidden from the brazen stare of trippers in char-a-bancs. Before the War, golf, cricket, lawn-tennis, and hunting had engrossed the energies of the well-to-do. During the War all and sundry did their "bit." Jess, as we have said, assumed the becoming kit of a V.A.D., and worked cheerfully and capably. Before the signing of the Armistice, the hospital in which she worked closed down. Of her three brothers, only one, the eldest, was old enough to serve, and he, fortunately, had served in England. He was two years younger than Jess. The Appertons lost two sons, and George, the youngest of three, became heir to a valuable

property, increasing each year in value, because it could be subdivided into what real estate agents call eligible building sites. Indeed, The Cedars had been part of the Apperton estate and lay nearest to the ancient manor house.

After the Armistice, Sloden-Pauncefort became slightly inebriated. The unprivileged had become prosperous. The privileged, on the other hand, were confronted with high prices and reduced incomes. In spite of this, it was generally admitted that the young people must be given a good time after the rigours and sacrifices of four years. The certainty of peace set everybody dancing who could shake a toe. Gentle and simple went a-fox-trotting. Chaperons were voted needless encumbrances. George Apperton, for example, would arrive after dinner and whirl Jess away in his two-seater to Melchester or Avonmouth. The amazing thing is that the Old Guard, amongst whom we must number Mrs. Apperton and Mrs. Yeo, surrendered without a fight. Some surrendered without a protest. The abjectness of this almost shattered the morale of Mrs. Yeo.

She would have been greatly comforted, if, as in pre-war days, the attentions of George had indicated intentions. Nothing of the sort; Jess, for the moment, was George's dancing partner. Out of twenty dances they might, and often did, dance fifteen. On Sunday afternoons, new steps were practised to the inspiring strains of a gramophone. George talked exhaustively about himself; Jess listened to him. She had an oddly maternal feeling for George, the aftermath of that warmer sentiment

of which mention has been made. George confided in her. He was in love, for the moment, with a young lady acting at a West End theatre. Indirectly, this fugitive passion had fired George to eclipse Felix Crewe in that gentleman's own particular part. Very soon he would return to his regiment and forget all about the stage and everybody who was on it. Meanwhile, he remained at home on sick leave, nursing a small open wound that gave him inconvenience rather than pain. He went out hunting, danced, and talked to Jess. Afterwards, Jess came to the conclusion that George, not Mr. Pell, had infected her with the *Bacillus histrionicus*. The young lady to whom he was attached had been one of the lucky amateurs who now and again jump into success at one bound. George admitted that strings had been pulled. A well-known dramatist, regardless of waiting lists, had insisted that a kinswoman should be given a part because she looked it. Within a year his protégée was earning and spending an income of thirty pounds a week. And her portrait—a complete series of portraits—appeared in the illustrated weeklies. Jess took the most sympathetic interest in this young lady's fortunes. Very soon—so the sanguine George predicted—she would be earning her five thousand a year. And, apparently, the driving power behind this astounding achievement had been the fact that she was bored to tears at home. Upon this subject George grew almost eloquent in praise of his beloved. English girls, according to him, wouldn't be able to "stick it" at home after the excitements and activities of the War.

To use his phrase: "They had tasted blood." George had to admit, under discreet questionings, that the young lady was not prepared to "stick it" as the wife of a hussar, whose regiment was on the roster for India. He remained—as Mr. Pell would put it—"on approval."

At the end of November, George was passed as fit by his medical board, and rejoined his regiment. Jess missed him horribly. Day after day the conviction overwhelmed her that life in Sloden-Pauncefort was becoming insupportably dull. She volunteered eagerly to relieve her mother of some at least of the strain of household management. But Mrs. Yeo kissed her, thanked her, and refused the proffered aid.

"I want to do something—anything," said Jess.

"You can take up your music again."

"If I practised six hours a day, I shouldn't get there."

"What do you mean by that, child? Where do you want to get?"

"I mean that it isn't in me to play decently."

"At any rate, you could accompany your brother, who sings delightfully."

"But mother dear, he doesn't. And he never will."

Mrs. Yeo replied briskly:

"Well, well, I am not comparing him to Caruso. Now, darling, I have a really bright idea. If you are tired of all this gallivanting, why not learn typewriting? What an immense help you would be to your dear father!"

Jess said slowly: "You see, mother, I want to

help myself. It may be selfish of me. I offered to help you in the house, partly because you do it so well, and I knew that I should learn a lot. However, if nothing better turns up, I may try typing. Thanks for the tip!"

Mrs. Yeo patted the cheek that had a dimple in it.

"In a fortnight, my dear, you will go to the Castle."

Upon the next day, by the luck of things, Jess received her part, and with it a letter from Mr. Pell. It was a curt letter, instructing his pupil to study diligently. He concluded, as follows: "... You must be letter perfect at the first rehearsal. Say your lines over in front of a looking glass. Get your cues. Never mind about positions. That will be my affair. Soak yourself in the part. I shall weigh in before tea on the 14th. After tea, I'll give you an hour's coaching. *A tantôt!*"

Jess examined her script. At the first glance, she was torn in two between the extremes of tears or laughter, the extremes which met upon the first page. Before the Sloden-Pauncefort theatricals, Mr. Pell had handed her a printed copy of the play. Now, under her wrinkled brows, lay a part. Nothing was there but her cues and her lines. It began thus:

... Where is that gal Giggles?

Enter GIGGLES, C., from scullery.

... Now, me girl, you hop it!

GIGGLES. You ain't Gawd.

... Yus, I am. Hop it!

[Exit GIGGLES, deflated.]

Jess instantly grasped the fact that the Castle theatricals were conducted upon professional pre-

cedents. From the script of her part, it was impossible to get even a glimpse of the real play. The stage directions were bewildering. For example, how was she to go out "deflated"? Resolutely, she set herself the task of solving this problem in front of a small looking-glass. She had left her father's den *deflated* many a time. She could recall some of his ironic valedictory remarks. Occasionally, he asked her to verify quotations. Once or twice, with all the cocksureness of youth, she had relied upon her memory with disastrous results. She could hear his voice: "I asked you to help me, Jessica, I regret to find that you can't."

How did she look when he said that? How did she feel?

Gropingly, she touched something, half closing her eyes. When she opened them, she beheld herself—deflated. Her pulses quickened. A first draft upon her imagination had not been dishonoured.

Reading the part steadily through, line upon line, it became more intelligible. At the fourth reading it gripped her. She beheld this coster girl, who was funny without intending to be so; she apprehended a Giggles who never giggled; she perceived the subtle change in characterisation, because, at the end of the play, Giggles laughed, and the laugh turned her from a puppet into a personage.

She went to bed, but not to sleep. And it was not her part, or the difficulty of playing it, that kept her awake. The script had become a symbol. In its starkness and nudity it stood, first and last, for self-expression. The author of the comedy didn't

ask Giggles to concern herself, primarily, with any member of the company except herself. Out of herself, out of her lines, she was to suck, like mother's milk, her inspiration. By her delivery of these lines she must stand or fall. Inexperienced as she was, she divined somehow that an actor must, of necessity, ignore everything and everybody outside his part. He must concentrate upon himself, evoke from himself the shadow created by the author and transmute it into substance. In this sense, he must be self-sufficing, independent of the fourth dimension, dependent on that dimension only as an audience assembled to criticise his performance. A famous clown had convulsed his audience with laughter, although his wife lay dead at home. That was art in its superlative expression.

Towards the small hours, Jess fell asleep and dreamed that, as Giggles, she laughed and made good in the presence of a father who scowled at her and cursed her as a rogue and a vagabond.

CHAPTER II

THE BACILLUS HISTRIONICUS

I

MR. EGERTON PELL had affirmed to Mr. Yeo that the Duchess of Sloden would be satisfied with his casting of Jessica for the part of Giggles, and being an enthusiast with real knowledge of his business, he may be pardoned for making such an affirmation. None the less, when he told the great lady what he had done, she expressed astonishment and dismay.

"Those Yeos are so stuffy and sticky."

"Not the girl."

"I can't remember the girl. Describe her to me."

Mr. Pell pulled himself together for an effort worthy of him ; but, being a wise man, he secured a possible line of retreat.

"I hate describing persons or places. However . . . to please you. She is a creature of agreeable surprises."

"Ah !"

"She surprises me. I thought her dull—no, not exactly dull, but apathetic, a 'yes, papa, no mamma,' sort of girl ; no initiative. I was absolutely mistaken. She has a strong will, and a very lively intelligence which she hides under a solemn

little face. I thought her an owl, but owls are wise birds. She thinks things out. She sees shades and gradations. People aren't either angels or devils to her. She doesn't rely exclusively upon the adjectives 'priceless' and 'rotten.' Of course she must be drawn out. As for her looks . . ."

"I'm all attention, my dear Pellie."

"I dislike describing a woman to another woman."

"Rubbish!"

"Her looks aren't—aggressive. There is an odd fascination about them that grows, beguiling curves. I stared at her nose for a week before I discovered that it was exciting."

"An exciting nose?"

"I mean one speculates where such a nose may lead the owner. It has a tiny tilt. But the lips droop. The eyes are grey, set well apart. Pick her to bits, and the bits are good. The whole is slightly puzzling. She arouses expectation, but I take it she has not been aroused. Her really great asset is her smile."

"A smiling owl . . .? With a pug nose . . .?"

"She ceases to be an owl when she smiles. I only call her an owl because she blinks at me. Well, well, you will form your opinion when you see her."

"If the affair is cut and dried, there is no more to be said; but I shall be furious with you if she puts me in the cart. My best scenes are with her."

Mr. Pell reassured her in his own soothing fashion. The Duchess added another word or two.

"Have you squared the author?"

"Certainly not. He trusts me."

The Duchess laughed.

"And so do I, Pellie. What an autocrat you are, you funny little man."

Mr. Pell smiled complacently, as he whispered :

"Strictly between ourselves, the author has asked me to produce the play in Manchester. If it goes as it ought to go, here."

Acting upon the principle that it is more blessed to give than to receive snubs, the Duchess said smartly :

"It may be a case of going, going, gone ! if your swan turns out a goose."

Later, the author, Arthur Cherrington, testified to his abiding confidence in Mr. Pell. Cherrington had not, as yet, won his spurs as a dramatist, but managers of West End theatres had an eye on him. He had written half a dozen capital curtain-raisers. His more ambitious efforts had just missed fire. He, too, like Pell, was an enthusiastic devotee, thinking, as Pell did, in stage terms, co-ordinating his energies all to one end—a big dramatic success. Pell was of the opinion that he would get home with this new comedy. If Manchester bit, a London contract would follow.

Cherrington arrived at Sloden Castle a few hours after Pell. It was quite agreed between author and producer that the latter must have a free hand. If necessary the author would write up certain scenes, or cut others. Stage business was to be left to Mr. Pell.

Upon December 14, Jess, pale with excitement, motored over from The Cedars. Alone with her mother, within a few moments of leaving home, she

heard the last injunction : " My little girl won't get stage-struck, will she ? "

And this had provoked a question simmering in a thoughtful mind.

" Why is father so against the stage ? "

When Mrs. Yeo remained silent, Jess had a glimpse of a reason withheld. She added quickly, " I am twenty-two, mum."

Mrs. Yeo nodded. Her voice became austere, as she saw the interrogation in her daughter's grey eyes.

" Yes, yes ; I can hardly believe it. Well, child, I am old-fashioned, as you know. I have kept the blinds down between you and some unpleasant aspects of life . . ."

She paused.

" Others, mother, have pulled them up a little. In the hospital . . ."

" I suppose so." She sighed. The persistency of Jess troubled her. However, if the truth must be told, let it come from her decently draped.

" There is a reason. A cousin of your dear father's married an actor. You have never heard us mention her."

" Because she married an actor. If she had *not* married him ! . . ."

" Don't interrupt me, Jess, and don't, please, interfere with my blinds. Your father was very fond of this cousin. From all accounts she was rather a bewitching girl. Her husband treated her abominably. We needn't go into that."

" I wish you would."

" I can't. He was a well-known actor. He

made love on the stage and off it. His wife left him, and alas! not alone. And afterwards she sank, poor thing, to the depths. Your father helped her with money to the last. She died miserably, a few years ago. That is all. But it accounts, adequately I think, for your father's prejudice, as you regard it, against the stage."

"But it might have happened to her if she had married a clergyman."

Mrs. Yeo winced.

"Please leave the clergy out of this, my dear."

"All right. But it might have happened if she had married a dentist."

"Possibly. But in the theatrical profession the Seventh Commandment seems to be honoured more in the breach than in the observance. This unhappy wife ran away with another actor, and he happened to be married."

"Oh-h-h!"

Mrs. Yeo kissed her.

On arrival at Sloden Castle, Jess was shown to her room, where a trim housemaid awaited her. A minute or two later, her hostess tapped at the door, and came in smiling graciously. To Jess, the Duchess appeared to be the impersonation of perpetual youth. During ten years, she had not changed at all. She suggested to Jess an exotic bird of exquisite plumage, flitting from branch to branch, a-twitter with life and the joy of life. The Duke, many years her senior, devoted himself to the management of his vast properties. He looked and was a magnate. The Duchess, as Mr. Pell observed, was magnetic, attracting all and sundry. At her table,

as likely as not, you might meet some imperfect ablutioner of a minor poet, who, obviously, was as a loss when it came to a right choice of forks. She entertained lavishly, and expected to be entertained by her guests, whether rich or poor. To her, dullness and dowdiness were unpardonable sins.

"My dear, how well you look!"

This was the formula of Count D'Orsay; age has not staled it.

Jess blushed a little, as the Duchess pressed her hand, and looked very well indeed. The châtelaine of Sloden and other castles continued gaily:

"Pellie raves about you. How are your people? I do hope you will be comfy here. Arthur Cherrington is dying to meet you. Don't take him too seriously, if he makes love to you. Really and truly, he's just trying on sentences for a new play, and studying their effect! . . . Will you come down to tea with me? After tea, so I understand, you are on duty with Pellie."

All this was chirruped in the softest, most ingratiating tones. Jess smiled. Instantly the Duchess acclaimed Mr. Pell's discovery. To keep such a smile for the climax, to spring it suddenly upon the audience, would be terrific. Pellie had described that smile as the dawn of the sun in Labrador after a six months' night. Pellie had not exaggerated.

To the amazement of Jess, the Duchess kissed her, saying confidently:

"I'm sure you are a darling."

II

Downstairs, the White Saloon was full of people chattering like monkeys. From the high walls, cavaliers with their languishing dames looked down upon motley. This was the first impression of Jess. She had expected something entirely different—a long tea-table, with the Duchess enthroned at the head of it, pouring out tea for guests who would be slightly awed at finding themselves in a treasure-house of pictures, porcelain, and furniture. The Duchess, however, poured out compliments, not tea. In her houses, people were invited to help themselves to the best of everything. Most of them did so.

"Cherry—here's Giggles, simply famished. Give her a poached egg and a crumpet."

With a wave of the hand she vanished, lost in the crowd. Jess beheld a pair of keen blue eyes intently, but not aggressively, staring at her. She wondered whether she was being weighed and found wanting by a clever young man. He appeared to be not more than thirty. Thick brown hair, with a wave in it, was brushed back from a fine forehead. Skin and eyes were clear. All women are instinctively influenced in their judgments by their first impressions. Cherrington impressed Jess favourably with his alertness. She was sure he could think and act swiftly. No moss on him. And no suggestion of the "nut." Obviously, too, he was no burner of midnight oil. He had the open-air look, the clean shapely limbs of the man who, probably, played games well.

"So you're Giggles," he said gravely.

Jess, with a face that matched his for solemnity, replied in the same tone :

"Yes, my lord."

A twinkle appeared in Mr. Cherrington's left eye.

"Come on and eat," he suggested.

He led her to a tiny table away from the crowd. A maid, in demure grey and white, flitted up and began to wait on them deftly. Cherrington explained the absence of men servants.

"The Duchess has no flunkys. The old butler remains. I'm told he refused to budge. These little maids are enchanting. Of course, you women have come into your own, and we may as well admit it. Are you greedy?"

"I'm hungry, Mr. Cherrington."

"In a place like this, I am sorry for the people who aren't greedy. We shall be done top-hole—simply top-hole."

"Simply?"

"That's it. The simplicity of the thing is what is so amazing. The Duchess is a genius at that. The Duke is a tray man."

"A tray man?"

"He loves his tray. When he can't stick us, he vanishes to his library, and has chops and beer brought to him on a tray."

"I see. Please tell me who some of these people are."

Cherrington obeyed, offering for inspection a series of thumbnail sketches, which reminded Jess of "highbrow" descriptions in printed plays. One sample will suffice.

"That woman in black and amethyst is Mrs. Tryon."

"The Mrs. Tryon?"

"The one and only—our leading lady, the perfect—no, the pluperfect, amateur. She really thinks that she can give old Sarah a stone over any course. It would be illuminating to hear what Sarah thinks of her. We call her the Snake, because, somehow, she glides into everything. In my play, she glides into Whitechapel."

"I—I supposed that the Duchess had the lead?"

"Lord, no! The Duchess, bless her, is a star of the second magnitude, out for laughs, not thrills. The Snake glides away from laughs. A come-in-the-silence-of-the-night serpent."

"Venomous, Mr. Cherrington?"

"Only to would-be rivals. You may as well call me Cherry. Everybody does, except the Duke."

Presently, Mr. Pell joined them, more jaunty than ever, and bubbling over with criticism of a new comedy, which he stigmatised as a six-weeker. Mr. Cherrington and he had assisted at the *première*.

"You give it six weeks," said Cherry, in an aggressive tone. "I should like to give you six months. There were sixteen calls after the last curtain. I counted 'em."

"First nights don't count. I should say what pleases first-nighters is not likely to please the public. Notices will be up in six weeks. Bet you a tenner."

"Done!"

"Giggles is a witness."

Mr. Cherrington booked the bet solemnly, and rose to his feet.

"I must go and pet my Snake. If I linger any longer with Giggles, as I am tempted to do, I shall find my dear Snake coiled and poised for a deadly stroke."

He slipped away. Mr. Pell said emphatically :

"Cherrington is a coming man. I've a sort of instinct about it. He will 'arrive' with this play."

"I wish you would tell me more about it. Can't I see the complete copy ? "

"Did your part worry you ? "

"Well, yes."

"I'm glad to hear it. You must escape from amateur ways and ruts. Bit by bit you'll assimilate the play as a whole. What concerns you is your part. The amateur gets the sense of the whole. He thinks that cues don't matter. When I say one of your cues, as I shall, presently, I want you to click in with the right line. No hesitating, no confounded thinking. When all that becomes automatic, we'll study the right inflections. Tomorrow, we shall run through the first act for positions. Bring a pencil to rehearsal, and note down exactly where you stand. I shall scold you before the company, if you are six inches out of your appointed place. The stage is small, and if you move, you'll mask somebody else. The ordinary amateur thinks all this doesn't matter, but it matters tremendously. Now, I can give you just one hour at the end of the Long Gallery."

Jess followed him meekly out of the saloon.

III

Within three days, she was in the thick of it, slightly befogged, but happy. She had told herself that she was an outsider, beyond the pale that encompassed these smart London folks. It astonished her how easy it was to get on with them. Systematically, although no traces of any system could be seen, the Duchess and her guests made life easy and pleasant. Apart from the serious work of rehearsals, these gay people seemed like children dancing along a broad highway. The War, for example, became remote. Nobody mentioned it. Amongst the guests who were not concerned with the theatricals might be found a Cabinet Minister, a famous doctor, and a hanging Judge. But such learned *signori*, so Jess noticed, were outwardly as light-hearted as the others. They ate, drank, and made merry.

Mr. Cherrington, on the alert for "copy," and finding Jess an adorable listener, used her—as the wise Duchess had predicted—as a Belinda, upon which he could drape freshly fashioned sentences and epigrams. Jess he regarded as a virgin mine, from which he might extract rich ore. He had almost decided to draw up a *scenario* round Jess, making her the central figure of a post-war comedy. What Jess might say, what Jess might do under given circumstances, interested him immensely. As yet, he had not attempted to make love to her, partly because he respected her innocence, and partly—the better reason—because her odd sense of humour intimidated him.

"What do you think of us all?" he asked her upon the evening of the fourth day.

"I'll try to answer that question when my thinking apparatus is less out of gear."

"Ah-h! You are bewildered."

"Is that very extraordinary? My bewilderment amuses you, doesn't it?"

"It would, if I knew more about it. Confide in me. This is, of course, a merry-go-round, and you are a bit dizzy."

She answered soberly. And her sobriety delighted Cherrington because beneath it sparkled a queer, self-revealing sincerity. The facets of this showed sharply in her reply.

"I call it a joy-wheel; and I'm wondering how I shall feel when I'm whirled off it."

"Really, you're immense; beyond my giudy horizon."

"Immense . . . ?" She smiled at him. "Are you pulling my leg?"

"Heaven forbid!" he ejaculated piously. "Surely, you know that you are one of the people who count, a young person who may become a personage!"

"I never have counted. In our village, I'm quite negligible. How does a person become a personage? Is it will-power?"

"With men, yes. I don't suppose that the beggar-maid willed to become a queen. King Cophetua willed that. His will, not hers, made her a personage. Let us wander back from personages to personalities. Why should you be whirled off the joy-wheel?"

She hesitated. Her clear eyes clouded. Her lips drooped at the corners where the dimples hid themselves till she smiled. Dared she confide in this clever, persistent young man, who was so very friendly? She said shyly:

"I go home after this. But you mustn't think that I'm unhappy at home. Quite the contrary. All the same, I'm living in a tiny circle, and it's growing tinier."

He moved nearer to her. His eyes sought hers. Without any tincture of coquetry, she lowered her lids. He took her hand, delicately, holding it lightly, without pressure and yet subtly conveying sympathy and respect.

"You must escape from that tiny circle," he whispered. Then he withdrew his hand. Jess remembered the warning of the Duchess. Was this part of his technique? Did he begin lovemaking like this? Or was it friendship? A feverish craving for friendship possessed her.

"How?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

She thought that he answered with constraint.

"Marriage is the usual door, isn't it?"

She hesitated again. He had spoken tentatively, with an inflection of doubt in his pleasant voice.

"Marriage? With two million superfluous young women in England?"

"If you willed to escape by that door, it would be easy, dear Giggles."

She murmured lightly:

"Out of the frying-pan into the fire. Please suggest another door."

"I wonder how ambitious you really are?"

Jess left him wondering. Her ambitions were too amorphous to be shaped into words. And, at the moment, she was neither sure of herself nor of him. She rose with a laugh. Together they strolled back to the room where the others were dancing.

IV

By the end of the first week, Jess did assimilate the play. It dealt cleverly with the well-meant efforts of the rich to bridge the gulf between themselves and the very poor. The coster scenes were astoundingly convincing. Cherrington told her that he had studied his subject when he had earned his living as a journalist. And she duly noted one significant fact. The dramatist might speak of the rich with his tongue in his cheek, but he rigorously denied himself the cheap and easy gibe at the poor. The tragedy of humble lives underlay the comedy in salient contrast. To Jess the amazing thing was that Cherrington had chosen comedy as the vehicle by which he conveyed the sense of tragedy. Would the public accept the message so conveyed? She put the question to him flatly. He shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no market for serious plays."

He cited a dozen instances of masterpieces presented before the War. The sophisticated few appreciated the works of Hauptmann, Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Galsworthy, and Miss Sowerby; the unsophisticated many, disdainful of what exacted attention and thought, wanted entertainment, not instruction. Cherrington concluded irritably:

"A dramatist cannot please himself. There are a thousand disabilities. Grant that he is indifferent to £ s. d., that he soars high above the box-office, can he possibly be indifferent to numbers? He must desire a wide publicity. I don't believe there is one honest highbrow who is content with a mere *succès d'estime*. The more he feels that he has a message to deliver, the more anxious he must be that the message should be spread."

As he spoke, Jess had a glimpse of the real man. A passionate intensity seemed to transfigure him. So much so that she remained silent, hardly daring to pursue the subject farther. At the same time, he had not convinced her. She still hugged to her bosom the conviction that Cherrington, so far as this play was concerned, would not be accepted by the public seriously, because he had deliberately adopted too light a style. If the French tag had any truth in it, was he essentially a featherweight—at heart more interested in the ludicrous which lies so obviously on the surface?

That night, after dinner, a famous composer of musical comedy sat down to the piano and amused everybody by transposing fugues of Bach and sacred music into rag-time. Mr. Pell sat beside Jess, and pronounced the performance to be a great "stunt." Presently, after swearing Pellie to secrecy, she repeated to him what Cherrington had said about his work. Pellie warmly defended his friend, with such ardour that Jess suspected the truth, to wit—that he had used his brains and energies in Cherrington's service.

"Cherry is absolutely right. I don't say, mind

you, that you are wrong. But he must make good. How? If he gets the ear of the larger public—which means for him a decent income, *and leisure*—he can please himself and tackle fugues or rag-time. At the moment, he must attack comedy, because, other things being equal, every London manager prefers comedy to tragedy. If Cherry joined the highbrows, he would languish, as they do, in comparative poverty. Dramatists can't have it both ways. Let me tell you something else. It's much harder to write good comedy than good tragedy. A big tragic story tells itself, works up to an inevitable climax, and sends everybody out of the theatre with a bad taste in the mouth. Who wants to see that sort of play twice? Not one in ten thousand! And now, my dear, one word more. Keep off my grass. I've been mowing and rolling Cherry for the last eighteen months. I'm frightfully keen on his success. He has the plastic temperament of the artist—easily influenced."

"He would not be influenced by me."

"Now, Giggles, no fishing for compliments!"

"I am not fishing."

Pellie stared at her solemn face and chuckled.

"Yes. I believe you. Well, you can take this from me: your sincerity is your greatest asset after your smile. I thought you stupid once, because you blink at the world like a little owl in an ivy bush. When I discovered your intelligence, I was enchanted. So is Cherry. He told me so. So is the Duchess. And the Duke, who has much in common with you. You've made a hit here. And the big triumph is to come. But—leave Cherry alone!"

He wagged a lean forefinger at her—warningly.

V

Cherrington, however, did not leave Jess alone. He talked with her, and to her, and at her. She learned something, not much, about his people, who seemed to be cut to the Yeo pattern. The Cherringtons lived at Surbiton. Cherry's father was on the Stock Exchange. He had begun as a striver, and was now a thriver, but not independent of business. Cherry, the bright boy of the family, had won scholarships, both at Eton and Oxford. He admitted to Jess that he had almost succeeded in paying for an excellent education. His people, from the first, had expected great things from him; and then, after many travailings, he abandoned academic rewards and adopted journalism as a profession.

"There were ructions at The Laurels, I can assure you."

"The Laurels . . . ? What a coincidence ! Our house is called The Cedars. There is only one cedar."

Cherrington laughed, expressing the opinion that people who lived in houses with botanical labels were exactly alike. He was wandering down this by-path when Jess stopped him.

"Tell me about the ructions."

"You see, my father pursues substance; he says that I am after shadow. Mother always agrees with father, because she sets an inordinate value on peace and comfort. My elder brother is an ass. He's in the business—up to his thick neck. I'm sure that father and he think that in the end they

will have to support me. They regard me as an adventurer, a bold buccaneer. And I might, with a bit of luck, have bloomed into a bishop."

"I don't see you as a bishop."

"Of course you don't. Nobody could with an ounce of imagination. I have a fair leg for a gaiter, and I used it to bolt from examinations. I was fed up with 'em. When I took to my pen, the fact was never mentioned in the family circle. When I tackled the Drama, and got a curtain-raiser produced, they regarded me as a lost soul. All the same, they would purr with pleasure if a big play caught on. That would mean substance."

Unlike George Apperton, Cherrington seemed to have no stomach for talk about himself. Probably—so Jess decided—his training as a journalist had made him an acute observer of others. Or—a more subtle reason—he kept himself in the background, because as yet there was no limelight to illuminate him properly. However, bits of information were squeezed out of him by the persistent Jess. He had joined up early in the War; he had been shot through the lower part of the left lung; he had been invalided out of the Army. Latterly, he had helped Pellie with his Red Cross entertainments. And he had been successful with his curtain-raisers. The "swank" which, curiously enough, rather endeared George Apperton to Jess was conspicuously absent from Cherry. Not that he could be accused of undue modesty.

Other men talked to her. Much to her surprise, great guns, like the Cabinet Minister and the Judge, popped questions and listened courteously to shy

answers. Somehow, Jess had not expected poppings, but thunder. Very soon, fear of the mighty ones vanished. To Pellie, her self-constituted mentor, she spoke with engaging frankness.

"They are not different from ordinary people."

Pellie was much amused.

"Bless your innocent heart, they *are* ordinary. Not, I grant you, when each takes his own stage. M'lud is terrific in Court. And our smooth-tongued statesman is Olympian in Downing Street. Really, it comes to this, my precious Giggles, these celebrities are more or less fagged out. They come here for rest and refreshment, particularly refreshment. Any man who succeeds nowadays, and any woman, is up against nerve-shattering competition. In the end concentration wins, and the bill has to be paid. Ordinary . . . ! About as ordinary as an arc-light when the current is cut off."

"Well, I think everybody here is extraordinary."

"Including yourself?"

"Oh! I'm the little owl, blinking at you."

"To-night, you will have another celebrity to blink at. Felix Crewe is coming to our show."

"Why isn't he acting?"

"Doctor's orders. He has let his theatre for six months. Overwork! No big actor, in my humble judgment, ought to be the manager and the owner of a theatre. Crewe goes one better; he produces his own plays. The strain is terrific. When they knighted him, I shed tears."

"Surely he deserved it?"

"So his enemies said. It's an astounding fact, but knighting actors seems to put them to bed."

No pun intended. Crewe is the kindest man alive. He'll help us. He likes Cherry. He doesn't like the Snake, but she won't find that out."

"She will."

"Now, why do you say that so positively?"

"We always know. Liking puzzles us, because we try to measure it; dislike is unmistakable."

"Has anybody ever disliked you?"

"Lots of people. Mrs. Tryon for one."

Pellie chuckled and rubbed his hands gleefully.

"I'm delighted to hear this. It confirms my judgment. The Snake would love you, if you were insignificant. She scents a rival; she trembles in her lair. Good . . . ! She will play up for all she's worth. Now, look here, you pay particular attention to any tiny tips that Crewe may give you."

"I'll gobble up all the crumbs. Don't worry."

Pellie became mysterious, pursing up his lips, slightly shaking his alert head. His voice dropped to a whisper.

"Crewe might finance our show; all the big towns. If he does, he'll insist on casting it. If he casts it . . ."

"Yes?"

Pellie's voice trembled with excitement. We must remember that he regarded Jess as his own discovery.

"I oughtn't to tell you."

"Now—you must."

"Crewe might ask you to play your part. Cherry thinks it quite likely."

"Heavens!"

She blinked at him, dazzled by the glaring

prospect, speechless with emotion. But her thoughts, never restrained like her words, travelled instantly to Manchester. Was this the door by which she might escape from Sloden-Pauncefort? The wide world opened before her in panoramic splendour. A horrible reaction followed. With amazing detachment she envisaged herself and her part. Really it was a small part. And, at rehearsal, the Snake's malevolent eye had conveyed a mocking message. "What can you do with it?" What had she done with it? Pellie, being a kind little man, had answered that question. The author, now regarded as a friend, had answered it. She was assured by these good fellows that Giggles would enjoy a tiny triumph. No more could be expected. She heard Pellie's voice, charged with electricity.

"Be calm! I'm going to tell you something about yourself. I may be wrong, but I'm not often wrong in subjective things. You are a subjective actress. The Snake is objective in her aims and methods. She's out for sensation. I suppose what I'm saying is Greek to you, but I'll put it in words of one syllable. Most of our English actors and actresses want to get over with a bang. They measure success by the number of calls. To get a laugh, they're willing—if I may say so—to jump head first into the big drum. Often that sort of thing defeats itself. The psychology of the play is wrecked. A character, carefully drawn from life by the author, is caricatured. The groundlings applaud, but even they are conscious that something is wrong. Generally speaking, the author is blamed. I've seen first-rate performances go to rags and tatters

because the leading man played the clown. And then the rest play down to him. It's rank treason and dishonesty. Crewe never was guilty of that. But Crewe is subjective. His business is always subordinated to his part. He is loyal to his author. And so are you."

"Me?"

"Sub-consciously, I dare say. In this part of yours, any designing actress, with experience behind her, could filch laughs from the Duchess. When I read the play, I was terrified that this would happen. Then I discovered you. Cherry has made the Duchess funny. She is expected to laugh at her own little jokes, because she sees that they are jokes. Really, you will be twice as funny, because you make your little jokes, and you don't see that they are jokes. Is there any Scotch blood in you?"

"None."

"I see no reason why you shouldn't take up the stage as a profession. Probably, if you play at Manchester, you will, because Manchester will appreciate your work. Miss Thorniman might engage you and put you through the right mill. Crewe could advise you about that. In any case you will have to serve your apprenticeship, acquire the right technique. It doesn't follow that because you can play Giggles you can play other parts."

"I understand."

"Cherry is against my telling you this, but I believe it will be tonic."

"I am quite dazed. You have given me the surprise of my life. Play at Manchester! . . ."

VI

Crewe arrived from London just before dinner. He looked tired and worn, so much so that Jess said to Cherrington :

" Why doesn't he cut loose altogether ? "

" He can't. They never can. They prattle sweetly about retiring to the country and the simple life. But they never do it, never. Crewe won't look tired to-morrow at rehearsal. You'll see. He's talking shop now."

As he spoke there was an intermittence of the buzzing in the dining-room. Crewe's clear voice floated to them :

" *King Lear*, given with all the stars, wouldn't run a fortnight."

Jess was much impressed, alike by the coincidence, and by what the great man said.

" Is he joking ? " she asked.

" No actor-manager jokes about productions. Shakespeare draws the few, not the many. When *Hamlet* was done, during the War, for about six weeks, who filled the theatre ? Japs, schoolgirls marched solemnly to the Savoy, and a few Shakespeareans, people from the suburbs, not . . . not London. At Berlin, I'm told, two of the great plays were running strong."

" Why do they prefer *Chu Chin Chow* ? "

" Because it's spectacular. It appeals to the eye and to the ear. I remember a wonderful play, exquisitely done, in which two angels appeared. They were fat, fat as the women in a Rubens. I asked the producer why he selected fat angels."

He replied solemnly: 'My boy, the British public likes 'em fat.' And they do. A thin woman upsets them. All the girls who are munching chocolates ask each other, 'Does the tweeny get enough to eat?'"

After dinner Crewe said a few words.

"I thought we should meet again, Miss Yeo."

Jess wondered whether he had remembered her name. Probably not. He continued lightly: "Are you pleased with your part?"

"I shall be pleased if I please others, Sir Felix."

He retorted quickly:

"You mustn't think of that. Put that from you. A counsel of perfection, you may say, but really it's elemental. Amateurs, nine times out of ten, play vilely to a house half empty. Satisfy yourself."

He drifted away. She wondered if he was satisfied. He had climbed the ladder, rung by rung. He stood securely at the top. And he could climb no higher. That, in a way, was tragic. Her heart warmed to him, because he was so friendly and courteous. But that was his way, part of his stage technique. She wondered whether so consummate an actor could ever forget his craft.

Unperceived, she slipped away from the crowd, and wandered down a corridor into a small room filled with magnificent pictures and furniture. The gems of the Sloden Collection were here. Jess sat down upon a Doge's chair, a gilded throne upholstered in cut velvet. Upon a table lay a catalogue, bound in green morocco. Full information regarding every object in the room lay within it. Six dukes—to mention no less exalted personages—had been collectors. The present head

of the family had not added much to the accumulations of centuries. How could he? Was there space for one more picture, or one chair?

"Alone, Miss Yeo?"

Jess looked up, and stood up. The Duke was smiling at her. He begged her to sit down again, and seated himself near her on a tabouret which had belonged to Louise de la Vallière. He said hesitatingly:

"Are there moments when the crowd is too much for you?"

She evaded the direct question.

"I like to slip away, sometimes. I wonder whether a room like this hates to be empty."

"You feel, perhaps, that it oughtn't to be left empty?"

"Yes, it's such a wonderful room."

"Ah! We call it, you know, the Sanctuary. I often come here. And, almost invariably, I find it empty." With abrupt irrelevance he continued:

"How do you regard such possessions? Tell me frankly. Do you think they ought to be the property of the nation—accessible?"

"I don't know."

"Nor do I. I may live to see these pictures confiscated. Perhaps, one day, I shall have to pay sixpence to see them."

He laughed grimly, shrugging his shoulders.

"You don't collect, Duke?"

"No. Why should I? I am too busy keeping the collections of my predecessors. I am really a curator. I wish I wasn't," he added testily.

"But would you like to be anybody else?" she asked.

He regarded her attentively.

"I shouldn't mind being you."

She accepted this solemnly, puckering her brows.

"Because I am young?"

"Because you are vital."

She remained, so the Duke reflected, comically solemn. And this pleased him. His guests, as a rule, were too much inclined to a mock levity, which happened to be the fashion of the moment.

"What is vitality? At home they think me rather a slacker. I'm enjoying myself here tremendously. Perhaps you envy me my power of enjoying things to which you have been accustomed all your life?"

He shook his head.

"It goes deeper than that, my dear. I may envy your youth, and your good health—who wouldn't? And your power of enjoying the passing show. Vitality, as I interpret it, is more than that. Unless I am mistaken, you are a perfectly natural human being. This house is full of mummers."

"Oh-h-h!"

"Bless me! I had forgotten that you are one of them. That proves I am right. You are not a mummer yet. And pray don't think that I am speaking of our theatrical friends. I include the others; I include myself. We are all expected to pose. I am horribly conscious of this whenever I address a public meeting. I should like to say: 'Go home! Get your facts from Nature! Cherish the open mind, the open heart, the open hand!' And if I dared to say that, my own son would have me locked up."

Jess thought to herself: "I wish you were my father; I shouldn't mind being locked up for a bit with you." Aloud, she said quietly:

"Thank you, Duke. Are you . . . Are you warning me?"

"Warning you?"

"Against the stage?"

He answered with obvious sincerity. "Certainly not. It never occurred to me that you were thinking of the stage. Are you?"

"Well, yes!"

"Um!" The Duke scratched his chin. "This is worse," he observed, "than addressing a public meeting. Platitudes are invading my jaded brain. Unless I am very careful, I shall say what your father would expect me to say."

"Please don't."

"The stage? Frances" (everybody, except the Duke, called the Duchess Fan) "tells me that you can act. I know nothing about that. I was speaking of people who act off the stage. No, no, I can't advise you. Talk to Crewe. All the same . . ."

"Yes?"

"I don't like the idea on general principles. Spare me whys and wherefores. I'd sooner talk about pictures. That one over there has a curious history. It was bought for twenty pounds. Another portrait by another painter was scraped off it."

VII

At rehearsal, Crewe sat beside Pellie, making notes upon the back of an envelope. Within three

days, the first performance would be given, to which the unprivileged would be invited. For a week the company had acted with scenery and properties. And, inevitably, signs of staleness had appeared. Amateurs, however gifted, are unable to stand the strain of constant rehearsing. Crewe, of course, would make due allowance for that. Apparently, he was taking many notes. When the curtain fell on the last act, he congratulated Pellie not too effusively. Mrs. Tryon said to the Duchess :

" We shall catch it presently. I don't care what he says to me in private."

The Duchess smiled. She had no intention of missing fun.

" Sir Felix . . ."

" Madam ? "

" Don't treat us as amateurs ! I'd sooner swallow my dose in public. It will encourage the others. Call each of us up in turn. You can begin with me."

Crewe said something to Pellie, who nodded. Then he stood up, an impressive figure anywhere. His smile vanished ; he spoke with professional curtness and directness.

" Certainly, if you wish it."

He came forward. The Duchess laughed and sat down.

" I'll take it sitting, Sir Felix."

" Your performance is streaky ; since I saw you last, you have acquired tricks ; you move and speak at the same time ; you do both jerkily ; no timing ; you seemed to be playing to the audience, although nobody was there. That's about all,"

The Duchess laughed again.

"Very many thanks. If you call yourself Nobody, my modesty shall eclipse yours. I played atrociously. Next . . ."

"Mrs. Tryon."

"Here, sir."

"You are overplaying. Please speak more articulately. Pick up your cues quickly, and then slow down. Remember that violence is not strength."

"I am most grateful, Sir Felix."

Crewe went on imperturbably, referring now and again to his notes. The humbler members of the cast, including Jess, escaped particular criticism. Jess said to herself: "He is too kind to scold a beginner. Anyway, I suppose my performance was negligible. Probably it escaped his notice."

Two or three scenes were rehearsed for the second time. A telling piece of business was suggested by Crewe, and adopted. Presently, script in hand, he took the stage, and went through the big scene in the third act. Jess was immensely impressed, and so was the leading man. The gulf between the amateur and the professional revealed itself, wide as the Atlantic. And his quiet, simple methods seemed to evoke from the others powers latent and unsuspected. As he left the stage everybody cheered.

When the gong for luncheon sounded, Cherrington approached Jess.

"He'll speak to you alone."

"You arranged that?"

"His idea entirely. Prepare for beans."

The beans, however, were not served till tea-time. Crewe sat down beside her.

"I left you out of the commination service, Miss Yeo."

"That was considerate of you, Sir Felix."

"No! I had to think over what I wanted to say. Is it true that you were acting some three months ago for the first time?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen much acting in London or Paris?"

"Hardly any."

"Just so. That, perhaps, explains you. What you do, comes naturally to you, eh? You don't think about your part, you play it?"

She nodded. He continued slowly, picking his words:

"Your author and producer are satisfied with you. I'm not. And yet it seems preposterous to expect more from you. Because you are good, I want you to be ever so much better. And if I attempt to coach you, the freshness and spontaneity may go."

"Coach me? You . . .?"

"Perhaps I have an axe of my own to grind."

She saw that he eyed her doubtfully, hesitatingly. As a matter of fact, he was not considering his axe, which he could sharpen upon some harder stone. Jess looked at that moment very soft, a creature of curves and contours, plastic, receptive, and yet alert. And this engaging alertness, which seemed to play hide and seek with her, challenged curiosity and interest. One push from him, and she would be over the precipice. From the parson at Sloden-Pauncefort, and from the Duchess, he had learned

about her people. Possibly he knew that her people would oppose her going on the stage. To persuade her to break loose from their authority involved a serious responsibility. He was fully aware of this, and troubled by it. She had amazing aptitudes, but he could not measure them. And he could remember so many failures, gay little barques putting gallantly to sea, a-flutter with bunting, spreading white sails to the favouring gale, and, later on, after cruel buffetings, piled up on the rocks!

He heard her whisper:

"Please coach me, Sir Felix."

The look of indecision left his face. He would attempt to measure her aptitudes, her potentialities. All said and done, the experience of a lifetime had taught him to know silk from shoddy. Silk might be ruined in the cutting; shoddy must reach the scrap-heap.

"I'll try you out at once."

She got up.

"But you haven't finished your tea, Miss Yeo"

"I am too excited to eat."

This, he reflected, was the right spirit.

"Where can we go?"

She suggested the Sanctuary. He nodded. A minute later they found it empty, as usual. Crewe switched on the lights in an eighteenth-century glass chandelier, and he made her stand under it, facing him.

"Understand," he began, "that all stage effects, to be effective, must be cumulative. Otherwise we achieve anticlimax."

He took from his pocket the script.

"This part of yours is the best in the play."

She became breathless with astonishment. Crewe laughed.

"Between ourselves, neither Cherrington nor Pell is aware of this. And, mind you, I use the superlative in its highest sense. The author, who is a clever young man with an enormous amount to learn, has made a fluke. If he knew what a wonderful fluke your part is, he would rewrite the play. Mrs. Tryon and the Duchess have capital parts with no originality about them whatever. They will play them well, but however well they are played, the performance will be far below other similar performances. Your part is entirely different. I can't recall one case of a girl who spoofs the audience so delightfully as Giggles ought to do. The very name must have been inspired. You appear at first as incredibly stupid. Bit by bit, line upon line, the stupidity vanishes. At the last, you stand revealed to a wondering world as the greatest wonder in it—a Galatea of Brick Lane. To play such a part consummately demands a technique that is hard to find on this side of the Channel, because your performance exacts a perfect crescendo from the first line to the last. If you anticipate the climax by one wrong inflection, by one ill-considered gesture, the illusion goes. Physically, you are just right. Pell dropped on to that. So did Cherrington. I don't know how you do it. I mean I don't know how you get your facial expressions, but I suspect that this part comes naturally to you because, perhaps, in your home life, you are a sort of Giggles. But I ask no impertinent questions."

Jess blushed, overcome by his insight. He went on imperturbably :

"If this facial expression of yours is thought out deliberately, conceived and studied in front of a glass, why then I take my hat off to you. Now, please, we will tackle inflections and gestures."

For a full hour, he coached her patiently. At the end of it, the knowledge he sought came to him. She had amazing aptitudes, an intelligence almost uncanny, but not uncommon in child actors, the bewildering plasticity of youth. As he put the script back into his pocket, he said sharply :

"Give me your hand."

She did so.

"Cold as a stone! Are your feet cold? They are! Good! One of my tests. To-morrow we shall see what sort of memory you have. Now, pop into a hot bath, and lie down before dinner. I must write some bothering letters."

"I can't thank you enough, Sir Felix. Do you think that if I worked hard I might do something on the stage?"

"I'll answer that question after the first performance."

CHAPTER III

MR. YEO PROTESTS

I

CHERRINGTON felt rather unhappy after the first performance of his play. Not so the more sanguine Pell, ever distrustful of the *première*. He rushed about, saying: "Pace—pace—we want pace!" The Duchess had not got her laughs. But Pell explained this. "Your own people won't accept you as a coster girl." Jess, alone in her virginal bower, dropped a few tears. No triumph had been vouchsafed her. Apparently, a stolid audience, bewildered by the irony of the comedy, saw nothing funny in her performance. In three words, she failed "to get over." Mrs. Tryon, however, was "accepted."

Crewe happened to be in London, but he returned next day. He told Jess to cheer up, saying:

"Call it a dress rehearsal. I have been in despair at my dress rehearsals. If they go well, I expect disaster to follow. Most managers will confirm what is a sort of superstition to us. To-night, you will have the right audience, and all will be well."

He predicted truly.

Nothing is so boring as the description of a performance intended, primarily, to appeal to the eye.

That is why so few people read notices of plays. In this narrative we are concerned rather with the effect of the play on others. And probably, with the exception of Crewe, Cherrington, and Pell, nobody present realised the excellence of Jess's work. She enjoyed the immense satisfaction of knowing that with them she had surpassed expectation. More, apart from them, she had her tiny triumph. When her illuminating smile broke upon her face, the house roared with laughter. The Duchess admitted gaily that Jess captured the big laugh of the night.

But the Yeo family were not impressed. Throughout the performance, Mr. Yeo nursed a grievance. Jess had spent Christmas away from home. Gloom settled upon the late Commissioner of Burrahbugpore. Doubtless the six-shillings-in-the-pound income-tax darkened present and future. And the Christmas bills . . . !

Mrs. Yeo sat beside him, austere critical of the Duchess as Saucy Sal. In Giggles, however, she recognised a Cockney nursemaid beloved by Jess when the child was nine years old. When she shared this astounding discovery with Mr. Yeo, he whispered testily: "You ought never to have engaged that gutter-snipe." It didn't occur to either of these good worthy people that Jess's reproduction of the gutter-snipe's accent, gestures, and grimaces constituted a sort of record. The conviction rooted itself that parents can't be too careful in their choice of nursery-maids.

Between the first and second acts, mother and daughter met and embraced fondly. Jess, naturally

enough, dwelt perhaps too insistently upon her "lovely time" at the Castle, and the kindness of everybody; but the expected word, the word that would fall like balm upon Mrs. Yeo's tissues, was not forthcoming; and without that word, how could Mrs. Yeo return to Mr. Yeo and the portentous "Well, my dear," which would exact the categorical answer? At the very last moment, the mother whispered excitedly, "Was I right, darling?" Hope foundered when the artless young woman replied, "What about, mummy?" But maternal anxiety routed discretion. Mrs. Yeo said sharply:

"Was I right about Mr. Egerton Pell?"

"You mean . . . ?"

"You know what I mean, child. Has he . . . ?"

"No, he hasn't. Such an idea never entered his head or mine."

With that assurance the unhappy Mrs. Yeo returned to her lord. And he, when he learnt the devastating truth, didn't spare her. To both of them the rest of the play was leather and prunella. Supper, however, with plenty of champagne, had a soothing effect upon Mr. Yeo. And the Duke was civil, uncommonly civil. The Duchess, too, wonderful bird of passage, flitted up to Mrs. Yeo and twittered sweetly:

"We are delighted with your girl. If Peace is signed, and we have a season, you must let me have her at Sloden House. I'll look after her."

Mrs. Yeo smiled graciously, but she thought: "I wonder who looks after you?" Possibly she did her hostess the injustice of believing that the invitation was not sincere, which it was. Fortu-

nately, Mrs. Apperton happened to be standing next to Mrs. Yeo. The Squire's wife could be trusted to repeat what was said with embellishments of her own. This reflection sustained Mrs. Yeo during the drive home.

II

Next day, Jess returned to The Cedars.

Before leaving, something remotely approximating to a love scene took place between herself and Cherrington. The adverb is used advisedly, inasmuch as Jess herself was unable to determine whether or not Cupid assisted as producer. Cherry bubbled over with excitement. Sir Felix Crewe meant "business." Nothing had been signed, but a contract impended. If he got his contract, would Jess play Giggles? As an added inducement, he held out the lure of a "written-up" part. Crewe had suggested that. Immediately, "What will father say?" became the unanswerable question. The valiant Cherry offered to "work the old man." Jess declined this offer.

"You don't know father."

"I take it there is something of you in him, some peg on which I might hang my hat?"

"If you are looking for that, bring a microscope with you."

Nothing daunted, Cherry plunged into the future.

"Crewe can get Miss Oldacre to play mother on and off the stage."

"Miss Oldacre . . . !"

The famous name, so intimately connected with the later Victorian stage, electrified Jess. Cherry

expatiated upon the privilege of working with and under the wonderful old lady, quite as charming as ever, although she forgot her lines. And if the play "went" in the provinces, a London engagement would follow. At this moment, Cupid, cunningly disguised, may have coached Mr. Cherrington. He concluded on a high note:

"I'm mad keen to get you, Jess."

This was the first time he had called her "Jess," and the sibilant name fell softly from his lips.

"Why?"

"Because you're a topper. I can make a real pal of you. I've got a whacking idea for a new play. I shall talk it over with you. We'll have rare larks together, little luncheons—dinners—suppers."

Jess sighed. The prospect was alluring, a mirage in the desert of Sloden-Paunceford. Cherry went on:

"You and I and Pellie and Nan."

"Nan?"

"Miss Oldacre. Everybody calls her Nan. She'll be your Nannie in two jiffs."

All this and much more percolated through Jess's brain-cells. The lamentable parting followed. Pellie kissed her. He kissed every pretty girl in public—the precious privilege of the elderly producer. Cherry contented himself with squeezing her hand. The Duke presented her with a tiny watch set in crystal. Jess hoped that he, too, would kiss her, but he didn't.

III

Safe and sound at home, Jess marked a change in the family barometer. She was not encouraged to

prattle about the gay doings at the Castle. When she left on her plate at luncheon half of a large helping of cold mutton, Mr. Yeo growled. The fry indulged in cheap chaff, addressing Jess as "Your Grace." Jess smiled at them. Nobody could rob her of an enchanting memory. Alone in her room, she may have gloated over it. Each night, Ibsen, read in bed, lulled her to sleep. Cherry had prescribed a course of Ibsen, and lent her "Peer Gynt." Pellie, observing that young palates must smother powder in jam, had given her "The Importance of being Earnest." Mrs. Yeo wondered vaguely why dear Jess "retired" so early. When she missed family prayers, suspicion was aroused, ripening into conviction and a sentence.

"Your father won't have reading in bed. It's ruin to the eyes, and the house might be burnt down."

There were moments when Jess wondered whether her parents took note of the flight of time. On occasion she was treated as if she were fifteen.

At the end of ten days a letter came from Cherry.

The contract had been signed!

More, rehearsals would begin at Manchester as soon as possible. He was authorised, with the sanction of Sir Felix, to offer the part of Giggles to Miss Yeo. She would receive the same salary that was set apart for a certain actress if she (Jess) were unable to play. Would she play? A definite answer must be given in twenty-four hours.

Jess went to her mother.

Mrs. Yeo was fond of saying that nothing surprised her. And in little matters this was perfectly true.

She bore with Christian resignation her own troubles and the troubles of others, having, indeed, the philosophical mind and temperament. At the moment, the world appeared to her to be upside down. Mr. Yeo shared this opinion, thanking Omnipotence that he had been born seventy years before Bolshevism convulsed society. Bolshevism, to this particular pair, stood for everything to which they were unaccustomed, for everybody who left the appointed grooves of convention. Deep down in some unexplored zone of sub-consciousness, they regarded the Duchess of Sloden as Bolshevik, because she had played Saucy Sal in a Whitechapel comedy.

Mrs. Yeo read Cherrington's letter. Then she said emphatically :

" Burn it ! Don't let your father see it ! I can't have him upset."

" But the answer, mother ? "

Mrs. Yeo stared at her daughter.

" There can be but one answer."

" That is just how I feel."

" You are my own dear little girl,"

" I mean—er—the answer ought to be ' Yes.' "

" What . . . ? "

" I feel that I must accept. It's a wonderful chance."

Mrs. Yeo kept her temper. We have her own word for this. More, she listened to an impassioned appeal from Jess, a cry from the heart, the importunate cry of the prisoner demanding freedom from bondage. All that Jess had suppressed burst from her in a torrent of words. And Mrs. Yeo was

not unmoved. When Jess finished, her hand was patted maternally. Jess realised that her mother was looking down upon her, as if from an apex of a pyramid of mothers, pityingly and tenderly.

"Yes, yes, darling, you don't mean all you say, but I understand."

"You don't," groaned Jess.

"I do. I have been young. I have been through this phase. Most girls have this craving to leave the nest. And I make great allowances for you, because this cruel war robbed you of your coming out. Let us talk this over as friends—without friction, or—or tears."

"Can we?"

"Of course we can. Now be sensible. Let's admit that you are a wee bit stage-struck. I am not a fool. I have seen all our best actors and actresses. Don't be offended if I ask you frankly why you think you can compete against trained people who have served a long apprenticeship?"

Jess answered truthfully:

"That's a mystery, mother. I can only suppose that there is something, I don't know what, that accounts for this offer."

And then, unfortunately, she blushed, for she remembered Cherry's words, "I can make a real pal of you." Mrs. Yeo beheld that blush and placed upon it her own construction.

"If you look in the glass, my dear, the apparent mystery will explain itself."

As the blush faded, Jess dismissed from her mind the words that had provoked it.

"I blushed," she said candidly, "like an idiot,

and you drew a wrong inference. Sir Felix Crewe is financing this show. He wants me. Why? Not for my looks, such as they are—and he could find dozens of better-looking girls—not to oblige the author and producer, but quite simply because he believes in that little something which you don't see in me and which I can't show you."

Mrs. Yeo, being an honest woman, had to admit that this line of argument was sound, so far as it went. She contended, however, that Sir Felix, where a small part were concerned, might have yielded to pressure from author and producer. Then she concluded majestically :

"It comes to this, child, you can't do this against your dear father's wishes. I prevailed upon him with great difficulty to allow you to play at the Castle. He objected, because he foresaw what has happened. The mere suggestion of Manchester will give him a fit. Spare him and me the pain of any further talk on the subject."

IV

No more was said, because mother and daughter happened to be interrupted. And, in any case, Jess recognised the futility of argument.

She wrote that afternoon to Cherry—accepting his offer gratefully. Upon a certain date—so it had been arranged by Sir Felix—she would meet Miss Oldacre in London and travel down to Manchester with her.

Having crossed the Rubicon, Jess calmly surveyed

the situation. She was twenty-two, and not absolutely dependent upon her father. A god-mother had left her a thousand pounds. When she was twenty-one, Jess remembered signing some papers in the presence of Mr. Yeo's solicitor, and he had said, "This money is yours absolutely, Miss Yeo." By that time the original thousand had swelled into some thirteen hundred pounds, and the interest of this was sent to Jess, who, at her father's desire, opened a small banking account.

Jess examined her bank-book with satisfaction. She had fifty pounds to her credit, and the January dividend was due.

Accustomed to travel comfortably along lines of least resistance, Jess contemplated a secret flight from the nest. Her father would be furious, but his fury would evaporate in a vacuum.

Afterwards, Jess wondered whether she could have carried this plan to a successful issue. It was burked, shortly after its inception, by Mr. Yeo. What Mrs. Yeo may have said to him will never be known. It may be surmised that she hinted to her lord something concerning a daughter's unrest; she may have touched upon the expediency of being more than usually kind and forbearing to their firstborn. Throughout his married life, Mr. Yeo had taken advantage of such hints, when they were dropped at a seasonable time. Much to Jess's confounding, he stopped growling and cooed at her, like any sucking dove. She became "My little Jess" again, and—signal honour—was invited to sort papers in the den.

"I can't bolt in secret," was her ever-recurring reflection.

After a sleepless night or two, she screwed up her courage to the bursting point of speech. Father and daughter were alone, and Mr. Yeo was about to impress his customary pecking kiss upon her cheek, when she withdrew abruptly from his encircling arm.

"Don't kiss me!"

"Why ever not? Have you a cold?"

"For three days, father, I have been getting kisses from you and pleasant words under false pretences."

"What on earth do you mean?"

Jess smiled faintly.

"I mean that if you knew what I want to do, I should be taking my meals, so to speak, at the side-table."

The expression of blank surprise upon her father's face confirmed Jess in the conviction that Mrs. Yeo had not run the risk of provoking a "fit."

That risk, in a pathological sense, was negligible. Mr. Yeo drew himself up, and assumed his magisterial air, frowning and pursing up his firm lips:

"Tell me as briefly as possible what you want to do."

Now Jess had rehearsed more than one speech in the privacy of her room, and she knew, from long experience, that passive resistance was a trusty weapon, the Excalibur of all women more or less under the heel of autocracy. Nevertheless, at this sore pinch, she threw from her that shining brand, and became as curt and direct as her father.

"I want to go on the stage."

"I thought as much."

This was not strictly true. We know that the possibility of his little Jess being stage-struck had occurred to Mr. Yeo. But he had dismissed it impatiently. And now, as impatiently, he said trenchantly :

"What you may want to do, and what you can do are very different things."

"In this case," Jess replied calmly, "what I want to do I can do. I have been offered a part and a salary."

"A salary? How much? Thirty shillings a week?"

"It works out at about three hundred a year."

"Really? You have been offered a year's engagement?"

Jess realised that she had blundered.

"My engagement is for the run of the piece. We expect that it will run for six months in the provinces and then go to London."

Mr. Yeo assimilated this. Possibly his judicial manner beguiled Jess into hoping and believing that the matter might be discussed temperately—upon what her father was fond of terming "business lines."

"And if it doesn't run, what then?"

Jess having no adequate reply pat to her lips, shrugged her slender shoulders. Mr. Yeo pursued his slight advantage.

"What do you propose to do, if this piece fails and you find yourself stranded in the provinces?"

"I suppose, in that case, I should try to get another engagement."

"Hawk yourself about to Tom, Dick and Harry?"



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Hang about agents' offices? Eat humble pie? Join the out-at-elbows army of understudies? Somehow, I don't see my daughter doing this."

"All that, father, is on the knees of the gods."

"I ask you these questions, Jessica, because I am trying to find out exactly what is in your mind. Before I deal with this astounding proposition, perhaps you will be kind enough to give me details."

Jess did so. In less than five minutes, Mr. Yeo was in full possession of the facts. Unlike Mrs. Yeo, he pigeon-holed the question of aptitudes. Indeed, he took for granted that Sir Felix Crewe was not a philanthropist. And he grasped firmly the nettle. Jess was of age, and the possessor of thirteen hundred pounds. She could pack her boxes and march out of his house at a minute's notice. Obviously, she intended to do this. How could he prevent such a catastrophe? He began again—for him, mildly:

"Are you unhappy at home?"

"No."

"Merely restless?"

"I want to paddle my own canoe, father."

"With or without my consent?"

"Of course I want your consent."

"And if I refuse my consent on grounds which to me are ample, although they may not appear so to an inexperienced young woman, what then?"

Jess answered valiantly:

"I suppose I must take the consequences, father."

"Tell me what you think those consequences might be."

The unhappy Jess wriggled, impaled upon a

barbed question. So far, Mr. Yeo was having the best of the encounter. Sooner or later, he would abandon his suave, ironical methods, and become the dictator. Woman's wit came to the rescue.

"I am sure you wouldn't do anything cruel."

Mr. Yeo was "touched." He acknowledged the riposte with a grim smile.

"What I might do would probably seem cruel to you. Children think dentists cruel. It comes to this—you want to cut loose from my house and authority. All over this unhappy country, thousands of girls are feeling as you feel. It is one of the most significant signs of the times—unrest. I think I can read you; correct me if I am wrong. You regard this as an experiment. If it succeeds, all is well for you; if it fails, you can return here and take up again a life which you admit is not unhappy."

This was exactly what Jess had thought. Put baldly, it seemed rather one-sided—a heads-I-win, tails-you-lose, proposition. Mr. Yeo marked her troubled eyes and continued quietly as before:

"As you don't correct me, I assume that I have read you fairly accurately. It may not be so easy for you to read me. Rightly or wrongly, I have a prejudice against the stage. We need not go into that. I consider the British drama to be at a low ebb, possibly at its lowest after the War. To know that my daughter was constantly subject to what I hold to be lowering influences and tendencies would be a great grief to me and a bitter disappointment. I am well aware that the stage has its distinguished ornaments. I speak of the many, not of the few. Sir Felix Crewe and Miss Oldacre, in your case, seem

to have promised their protection. Do they assume full responsibility ? ”

“ I don't know.”

“ I can assure you they don't. How could they ? Their responsibility ceases when this particular play comes to an end. Then you will be thrown upon your own resources, to sink or swim. If you are sinking, I, as your father, throw a rope and drag you ashore.”

Jess remained silent, unable to see herself sinking. Inexorably, Mr. Yeo delivered his verdict :

“ What will be your condition then ? I have other children at an impressionable age. I must consider them. How do I know that you will return to us as you left us ? ”

“ I hoped that you had more confidence in me.”

“ I have confidence in you as you are. What you might become, what anybody might become under conditions fundamentally different from what obtains here, is beyond my cognisance. I am not going to threaten you.”

“ Thanks.”

“ What I say is a solemn warning. If you elect to leave this house, I can't prevent you. For all our sakes, I must avoid any scandal, any gossip. But don't count on coming back as a certainty. We have tried to protect you not only against others, but against some of the more subversive tendencies and temptations of youth. In the fullness of time we hoped that you would marry the right sort of man, and start a happy little home of your own. This step into the unknown imperils all that. You can leave me now. Think over what I have said.”

With dignity he dismissed her. Jess had expected violence. Her father's quiet strength impressed her. But she knew that he would never retreat from what he held to be an impregnable position. He had dictated his terms.

V

Mrs. Yeo tried other methods. Indeed, the Yeo family combined, as a unit of national life, against Jess. They coaxed and cajoled; they fulminated; they sulked. All in vain. Something that Jess couldn't define urged her along an appointed path.

Sloden-Pauncefort, up to the last moment, remained in happy ignorance of what was happening at The Cedars. When the truth became known, the village for at least a week resolved itself into a debating society. The Stage, as a profession for young ladies, *pro* and *con*, was the only theme at tea-parties.

Meanwhile, Jess had reached Manchester.

And she had met Miss Nancy Oldacre.

That gracious lady soon put to flight the girl's misgivings and prickings of conscience. Miss Oldacre's philosophy had never varied since she was old enough to think. All was for the best in the best of worlds. This agreeable attitude towards life informed her work, and accounted partly for her triumphs. Joy in life radiated from her. It "got over" before she opened her mouth. No living woman could walk on the stage with her irresistible, incomparable assurance. Because of that she was almost, not quite, devoid of professional jealousy.

But she admitted, with the gayest laugh, that in her youth she had been jealous.

"We all are, my dear."

Cherrington, Pell, and even Sir Felix, were at her feet. A suite of rooms was provided—two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a parlour. Miss Oldacre called it a parlour, because, as the name signified, people talked in parlours.

"I'm a talker," Miss Oldacre informed Jess. "I talk in my sleep."

"My mother is a great talker," said Jess, "but she talks people to sleep."

"If I did that I should commit suicide."

Gorgeous flowers were sent to the parlour

"They haven't forgotten me, my dear."

"Forget you? I wonder if anybody could!"

It will be seen that the young lady had surrendered unconditionally. The parlour became a radiating centre of light and heat. Miss Oldacre, at tea-time, was at home to new friends and old friends. She poured out tea and conversation, both of excellent quality. But the talk, wherever it might wander, almost invariably began and ended with the Stage. The wonderful old lady was an "Enquire Within," if any information whatever were wanted upon any play produced in her time. With such a memory for detail, it was difficult to believe that Miss Oldacre forgot her lines. Perhaps, so Jess thought, there was no room for the new in a mind that retained all that was old.

Rehearsals began at once. The company met at eleven and worked till five, with an hour off for luncheon. Some rehearsing had been done already

in London, but, with the exception of Miss Oldacre, there were no London stars in the cast. The leading man and the leading lady, as Pellie informed Jess, were favourites in the provinces. They lacked the polish of the metropolis. Cherrington said that they 'ladled out the good old stuff with a spoon.' This meant, in plain English, a dramatic delivery, a slight over-emphasis of lines and gestures. No *restraint*. This last word was on every lip. Miss Oldacre made fun of it.

"I don't believe, my dear, in restraint. I let myself go for all I'm worth. 'Play up' is my motto. Get all the colour you can into your part."

At first the company sniffed at the amateur. Frowns were her portion if she moved an inch beyond the fixed positions. Eyebrows were raised superciliously if she altered the pitch of her voice. The question that became insistently exasperating was, "Can't you give me something, dear?" The "something" might be anything from a smile to a frown. And once given it must be stereotyped. Very soon, however, the pros became more friendly. Pellie as producer, with Sir Felix as final arbiter, surpassed himself in tact and patience. Small scenes were rehearsed again and again till Jess ached with fatigue. She was astonished to discover that initiative was not demanded of the performers. The leading man expected to be "produced." Pellie said to Jess, "I tell him when to blow his nose."

She made great friends with the girl who played Saucy Sal. The Duchess, with all her cleverness, was too old for the part. Sir Felix had discovered Miss Osborne (her stage name) understudying a

Cockney part in a blood-and-thunder drama. Her real patronymic was Toop—Florrie Toop. Mrs. Toop, her mother, who accompanied Florrie wherever she went, belonged to the profession, or, as she called it, "the profesh." Florrie, as a child, had played in "panto," and anything afterwards that offered. But this Manchester production was her first great opportunity.

"Gawd has been good to me," she kept on repeating. "I was understudying Miss Biffen, dear. Flu' downed her, and I hopped on. What happened? Gawd sent Tommy Pumford to look at our show. He saw me, and told Sir Felix. That's that. Muds thinks I shall make a hit."

Muds was a *nom de caresse* for Mrs. Toop, who had a familiar spirit—brandy. Brandy, however, was not easily obtainable, and sold at an almost prohibitive price. Florrie made no secret of her mother's infirmity.

"Muds can't do without her tiddley."

Mrs. Toop, it must be added, kept within the bounds of sobriety, as that word is understood in the "profesh." And she was certainly a devoted mother and watch-dog, keeping enterprising youths "in hand" and "on the string." Florrie accepted flowers, compliments, good food and drink, and inexpensive jewellery. The youths, in return, received Florrie's conversation, Mrs. Toop's advice, and many autographed post cards.

From these two persons Jess learned much concerning the seamy side of the stage. Mrs. Toop was born, so to speak, in the green-room—that now mythical place which no longer exists except in fiction.

"Muds dropped like an angel from the sky, when grandma was on tour. Grandma went on inside of a fortnight. Muds has played leading boy all over the shop, but never at the Lane."

This was Mrs. Toop's undying grievance. She had never appeared at Drury Lane.

Two other persons challenged the interest and attention of Jess—Tommy Pumford, Sir Felix Crewe's faithful general manager, better known as "Pummy," and the stage manager of the company, Owbridge. Pummy had been with Sir Felix for five-and-twenty years. He was round and rosy, blessed with a disarming smile that was worth a thousand a year to Sir Felix. Pummy dealt drastically with authors' representatives and everybody connected with the business 'end.' Sir Felix was notoriously generous; Pummy was admittedly a cheese-parer; a happy combination of give and take. His first interview with Jess demonstrated this:

"Your salary, Miss Yeo, is ridiculous, it is indeed."

"Is it, Mr. Pumford? I am quite content, no complaints."

Pummy exploded.

"No complaints . . . ! That's a good 'un. We're overpaying you."

"Oh-h-h !"

"Fact! Governor's orders. Somebody got at him. Well, it's up to you to earn it. My job is to keep down the salary list in the interests of all. Wearin' work—simply heartbreakin' for a man of my generous disposition."

"I'm sure it must be."

Thereupon Pummy winked and chuckled. His disarming smile appeared, as he observed smartly :

"Buck up, dear, and make good."

Owbridge was a gentleman of another kidney. Lean, pallid, with a lugubrious expression that provoked roars of laughter from the pit and gallery. Besides his onerous duties as stage manager, which include everything connected with the stage—properties, lighting, and so forth—he generally played some small character part to perfection. Pummy and the Owl had accompanied Sir Felix when he made his famous tour of the world. They remained with him now that he had let his West End theatre. Pummy sang the praises of his chief, regardless of time and place. The Owl was not a songster ; he confined himself to one remark :

"Governor's a bit of all right."

And this, so Jess soon discovered, was the unanimous opinion of the company. Miss Oldacre summed up Sir Felix without fear or favour :

"He's sound to the core, a King Pippin. Not superlatively great, like my dear father, not an overwhelming personality like Henry Irving, but always a trier, and always honest. Modest, too ! And such a fine face. I love him, and I'm horribly worried about him."

"He looks so tired."

"He is tired. He oughtn't to be here at all. But he can't let go. None of us can. We go till we drop, and why not ? My father died in his dressing-room. There are worse places. Felix is running this show strictly against his doctor's orders. It's

not a question of money ; he has pots and pots ; but he believes in this play. And he backs his beliefs. He's backing you."

"I know—I know. I ought to be grinding away in some dramatic school."

"Rubbish ! Purge your mind of that ! In my day, we had no dramatic academies. We went on. Look at the kiddies ! If it's in them they take to the business as ducklings do to water. They get their lines long before we do ; they drop, somehow, into the right positions. You're a kid at the game ; but it's in you to make a player."

"If you say that . . . !"

"What is wanted ? Who can answer that question ? Not I—for one. What is it that gets over ?"

"Personality . . . ?"

"Too vague. Driving power, perhaps ; the will to win which won this War. And charm. Felix has charm. He hypnotises his audience. I have seen him play awful parts full of stilted impossible lines, full of unconvincing situations, but he got there all the same."

"Mr. Cherrington says that he is a subjective actor."

"So he is. So artful that you can't twig his art. Nobody has worked harder. Other things being equal, work does it ; but not overwork. I'm afraid that dear Felix will never play again."

VI

By this time Jess was heels over head in love with her job, and as happy as a healthy girl can be.

Cherry assured her that "her stock was booming." Bit by bit he added to her original part, not without protest from some lady members of the company. Florrie said, with a toss of her pert little head :

"We know he's your boy."

Jess knew nothing of the sort, and said so with a tincture of acidity. Florrie laughed.

"I've watched him. So has Muds. She had 'two' this morning. Brisked her up amazing. We all wondered why you was dug out o' the potato-patch. You ain't bad, not too bad. I'll say that. But, Lord love a duck! there's others. Proper bit of luck, I call it. But Muds called me down with one of her particular winks. 'Ask the author,' she says."

"And did you?"

"Not me. I want to play in his next piece. I watched him. He gives himself dead away whenever you're on. This morning you were rotten."

"Was I?"

"You bet! In a dream like, thinking of HIM, may be."

"I wasn't!"

"Don't get the needle! My mistake. He was thinking of you—never strafed you; sat through it with a silly smile on his face. You've got him for keeps, if you want him. 'Nother bit of luck. He's a winner. Muds says so. He can write plays for you; boom you sky-high. Well, where was I at? Yes; Mr. Pell was on to you. I saw him wigglin.' In two twos you'd have got it to rights. I saw him turn to Mr. Cherrington, and then he saw what I saw—that silly smile. And it crumpled him up."

At this moment Owbridge's voice was heard :

" Miss Osborne."

" Here ! "

Florrie skipped on to the stage. As she did so Owbridge's penetrating comment reached the wings :

" We're not overpaying you, me girl, to miss your cue, and hang up scenes."

Florrie replied cheerfully, " Pardon ! "

Jess remained alone, covered with confusion and abjectly miserable. She recalled her mother's hints, and Pummy's remark about Sir Felix and her salary, " Somebody got at him." She pieced together a dozen sly innuendoes from members of the company. It was quite intolerable to think that she was not playing " Giggles " on her merits, but merely because the author of the comedy was " silly " about her. Pellie, however, was not " silly " in that sense. Engrossed in such unhappy speculations, she heard her name :

" Miss Yeo . . . ! "

She had missed her cue.

Pellie, who was in the stalls of the theatre, jumped up.

" This won't do ! What's happened to you girls ? Are you sleepy ? Damn it all, you're not here for fun."

Jess nearly shed tears. Then she heard Cherrington's voice from the back of the house :

" It's all right, Miss Yeo. You haven't missed many cues. Buck up ! "

Florrie, in the middle of the stage, winked impudently, and stuck her tongue into her cheek. Pellie said testily :

"Am I running this show or not? Get on with it!"

After the rehearsal, Cherrington walked back with Jess to the hotel. Being a good fellow, and seeing that Jess was in distress—for her cheeks displayed, in vivid pink, an S O S signal—he said pleasantly:

"Are you vexed at being strafed?"

"Not a little bit. I deserved it."

"Something is worrying you. Tell me."

His voice was soft and persuasive. He slipped his arm into hers. The friendly pressure reassured her.

"I am worrying a little."

"What about?"

"My—my luck. You said the other day that my stock was booming. What have I done to make it boom? Mr. Pumford says I'm overpaid."

"Mr. Pumford . . . be blowed!"

Jess was not much comforted. She said nervously:

"Did you say anything to Sir Felix about my salary?"

Cherry replied airily:

"Of course, the question of salaries came up between us, when we were casting the play."

"I mean, did you suggest that I should be paid as . . . as generously? Florrie says that dozens of clever amateurs are ready to pay a premium to walk on."

Cherry tackled the last half of the sentence.

"And I'd pay 'em a premium to walk off again. Now, look here, you stop worrying. Worry will react on your work. Crewe wanted you; and so did I; and so did Pellie."

"That is nice to hear, but you evade my question. You have no idea how obstinate I am. I get that from father. Who settled my salary?"

"I admit that I said something to Crewe about it."

"What did you say?"

"You do stick like a leech to your objectives. Well, my beloved Jess, I pointed out to Crewe that yours was rather an exceptional case, involving possible ructions. Mind you, I repeat, he wanted you. We agreed that a decent salary would cut a lot of family ice. It disposed of one iceberg, at any rate. Your father had to admit, I take it, that good salaries are never paid by famous actor-managers to indifferent performers. To adopt another metaphor, we wanted to soap the ways a bit, so that you might slide from Sloden-Pauncefort to Manchester without taking a toss."

He spoke so sincerely that Jess was profoundly touched. She said meekly: "That was sweet of you."

She wanted to say more, but words stuck in her throat. Cherry dropped the subject, and began to talk about his new play.

VII

After many ponderings, Jess came to the conclusion that Florrie and Muds were mistaken. Friendship, not love, had brought her luck. It was a tremendous thing to be lucky. Already, she had fallen a victim to the superstitions of the stage. At the first rehearsal, the black theatre cat had rubbed itself against her, purring softly. The leading man

had tried to beguile pussy from Jess, but the wise beast had resisted his blandishments, and later he had remarked with odd petulance to Jess :

" That cat went for you."

The call-boy, who happened to be a call-girl, was immensely impressed.

One thing was certain: Cherry did not "give himself away" to the person most concerned—herself. Several young men had made love to Jess. Their technique was much the same. It included five-finger exercises, diminuendos, crescendos, ending with the "con fuoco" passage and the retirement of the virtuoso. None of them, with the exception of George Apperton, had evoked any response from Jess. And now, looking back, it was difficult to decide whether or not she had been in love with George. Anyway, she told herself decidedly that she was not in love with Cherry. She liked him immensely, admired his pluck and cleverness, and applauded with both hands his determination to "win out." The same vaulting ambition obsessed her. The Yeo family, from Triton to Minnow, must be forced to admit that she had chosen the right path, justified the flight from the nest. They would make this admission, more or less grudgingly, when the public "accepted her."

Next morning, Mr. Pumford was at the theatre, in his office. Jess asked to see him. Pummy, the sly rogue, kept her waiting—an obvious trick to enhance his self-importance. But he smiled genially when she came in.

" And what can I do for you, Miss Yeo ? "

"I am not quite satisfied with my salary, Mr. Pumford."

Pummy nearly jumped out of his chair.

"Now, Miss Yeo, that won't wash, believe me. I told you we were overpaying you."

"Yes, you did—that's why I'm here. I'm prepared to take much less."

Pummy stared at her. This was a new experience for him. He didn't quite know how to meet it.

"Are you? This is an eye-opener. Take much less, hey?"

"I want what I'm worth—not a penny more, not a penny less."

Pummy chewed the end of his pen—a habit which indicated perplexity. If he cut down this particular salary, Sir Felix would ask questions. If it leaked out that he, the business-manager, was the exciting cause of this amazing request, Sir Felix might be angry. Pinching instincts had landed Pummy in trouble more than once. He laughed at the solemn face in front of him.

"Like to pay down something, perhaps, for the start we're giving you?"

Jess said earnestly:

"I'm ready to do that, if it ought to be done."

"Little ray of sunshine you are. Now, Miss Yeo, don't waste my time. You take what you can get. If you feel you're overpaid, why, dammy, you ain't. I can't bother Sir Felix about this. If you go to him, he'll tell you not to be a goose."

"Please tell me what I'm worth."

"At the end of the first week, I will"

"Is that a promise?"

"Yes."

With that, Jess retired. But she was quite unaware of the impression she had made on the plastic mind of Mr. Pumford. In his desk lay a small leather-bound book, the vade-mecum of the business-manager. It contained names and addresses of actors and actresses, with a space left for comments. Mr. Pumford opened the book and turned the pages till he came to "Y."

"Jessica Yeo (Miss), The Cedars, Sloden-Pauncefort, Melshire."

Against this entry Mr. Pumford made another—"Straight."

Jess, in spite of Pummy's warning, might have gone to Sir Felix, but he had returned to London. It was doubtful whether he would be seen before the first night. His absence indicated complete confidence in Mr. Pell. It indicated, also, the great man's generosity. On the big posters appeared Sir Felix's name as "presenting" the comedy to Manchester. Mr. Pell's name, in smaller script, was announced as that of the producer. Jess passed many pleasant minutes staring at these posters.

"Giggles . . . Miss Jessica Yeo."

She had refused to adopt a stage name. Mrs. Yeo had protested. But Miss Oldacre waived aside that protest with an inimitable gesture:

"Sail under your own flag, my dear. *We* have always done so."

The royal "we" might be taken as singular or plural.

"That is good enough for me," said Jess.

Cherry applauded this prompt decision.

"Tell your people to order ahead the 1921 edition of 'Who's Who.' We'll both be in it, you and I. Then the great panjandrams at The Laurels and The Cedars will tumble off their perches."

"Aren't you in 'Who's Who'?"

"To the everlasting disgrace of the editor, I'm not. I refuse to buy the book on that account. But my autobiographical notice is ready for insertion. Some are screams. One fellow sets down under 'Recreation' the illuminating word—'Self-advertisement.' Honest chap, that! By the way, when you become a star, don't, please, tell a wondering world that you 'create' parts. That makes us poor dramatists very sick. By this time you've seen enough of production to find out who does the 'creating.' When the happy day dawns, I'll do your notice—a corker. What shall I put under 'Recreation'?"

Jess smiled.

"Can't you guess?" she asked demurely.

"No."

"Listening to Mr. Cherrington."

"I hope he'll be listening to you from the author's box."

This trivial talk is set down to show the intimacy that had established itself between these two. Pellie devoted himself to Miss Oldacre. He told her, that, as a youth, he slept with her photograph under his pillow. The sprightly Nan was delighted, but, under cross-examination, he had to admit that Miss Kate Vaughan and Miss Nellie Farren shared the same honour and place.

"A polygamist at eighteen!" observed Miss Oldacre.

When she and Pellie played "Patience" together, after dinner, Jess and Cherry sat upon the parlour sofa, whence they swooped on easy pinions into the roseate future. Jess duly noted in a retentive memory that these aerial excursions on the part of the dramatist always included herself as *compagnon de voyage*. But she knew that after the *première*, very soon after, he would return to London.

When this lamentable fact obtruded itself, he asked smilingly :

"Will you miss me, Jess?"

"A teeny-weeny bit, perhaps."

But, unlike other courtiers, he never followed up such easy openings. Possibly he disdained them. She was well aware by this time that his income was modest and precarious. He had a tiny flat in West Kensington, and belonged to a famous club—The Buskin. And he knew the right people, using Mrs. Grundy's adjective. He knew also a number of quiet little restaurants wherein he hoped to entertain Jess when she came to town. She beheld Bohemia through his eyes, and longed to enter that paradise so dear to the young. She had a glimpse of it even in Manchester. Indeed, Miss Oldacre's parlour became a sort of Mount Nebo, from which she looked down upon the Promised Land.

VIII

The fateful night drew near.

Jess was essentially modest ; but only a fool could have ignored the conviction that she had "come on" tremendously ; the unaccountable plasticity of

the child actress seemed to be an inalienable possession. She obtained her effects unconsciously. That sedulous little ape, Florrie, was her antithesis. Florrie knew—none better—how and when and where to make the most of herself. She never tired of rehearsing grimaces before the devoted Muds. Good-nature prompted her to "school" Jess.

"If you ain't careful, you'll be snowed in, dear. I could queer you as easy as lickin' oysters off the shell. Wait until you come up against the devils in the profesh. My! You'll have to fight for your laughs then. Some of 'em can steal the fat out of another's part, and you can see it meltin' in their mouths. Crool! I've been ridden on to the rails many a time. A jockey boy o' mine taught me that expression. He'd been there himself. Well, you ain't the blightin' amateur I took you for."

At the last dress rehearsal, word came that Sir Felix was unable to leave London. Miss Oldacre was very unhappy. She inferred that he must be ill. The papers, however, had not been informed of this. Pumford, however, could be trusted to withhold disconcerting news from the pressmen—and from everybody else, as Miss Oldacre observed.

"Does it make much difference?" Jess asked.

"His being here? Of course it does. He has been extraordinarily successful in his productions. And he is so popular. A mere sight of his face in a box kindles enthusiasm. The fact that he is not here will be taken by ill-natured persons to mean that he is not sure of the goods to be delivered. And he knows this. When he said good-bye to me, he promised to turn up. This is our first bit of bad luck."

Upon the same afternoon, Jess was interviewed. A lady in spectacles, notebook in hand, presented herself. Jess never discovered till long afterwards who had arranged this exciting surprise. Was it Cherry? Obviously somebody wished to give her a "boost" (as Florrie put it) up the ladder of Fame.

Jess blushed, you may be sure, when the spectacled lady asked for "copy." Was this a first appearance? Yes. Did Miss Yeo feel nervous? What did she think of Manchester? Jess answered the questions stumbingly, but the spectacled lady lent a helping hand. Then Jess became the interlocutrix. Why had this honour been conferred upon her?

"Oh, we like to chronicle first impressions. Sir Felix engaging an amateur to play an important part has aroused much curiosity."

"But the part isn't important."

"We confidently expect that you will make it so."

Left alone, Jess experienced dismal qualms, physical flutterings of heart and pulse. Next day, the interview was printed under the caption: "A Virgin Page." Cherry read it aloud; everybody chaffed her. Florrie said, with another toss of her head:

"Your boy worked that."

"He didn't. I asked him."

As a matter of fact, Pummy had pulled the little string, not altogether for business ends. Jess had captured his cheese-paring mind. And her increasing aptitudes almost reconciled him to the overpaid salary. He rushed about, saying: "She's a winner. I have a nose for 'em. All you doubters can wait and see."

Her dresser was among the doubters. But most dressers are pessimistic about untried plays. They have witnessed so many failures. Jess shared her dresser and her dressing-room with Miss Osborne. Muds sat in a corner hoping for the best, and loud in her praise of Mr. Pumford because he had thoughtfully provided wine and cigars for the gentlemen of the Press. Jess divined that Muds on first nights was unable to slake her thirst with "two."

Bunches of roses arrived with the author's card attached. Florrie had many flowers, and half a dozen telegrams. She sat in front of her glass, making up. Upon the table were framed photographs, picture post cards, and many souvenirs including programmes autographed by the cast. Jess envied her the programmes. . . .

"Beginners."

The call-girl summoned Florrie to the stage. She was on before Jess. Cherry came in.

"Packed house," he announced. "And lots of money in it. Pummy is pleased."

Jess thanked him for her flowers. She could see that he was on edge with excitement. She held out both her hands.

"Good luck! And thank you again and again for all your kindness."

To her amazement, before the dresser, and without warning, he placed his hands upon her shoulders and kissed her.

"Good luck to you, my dear little Jess."

He rushed away to take his seat before the curtain went up.

"Quite the gentleman," remarked the dresser.

Jess was wondering whether blushes showed through grease-paint.

In the distance, she could hear the band playing a jolly tune. The dresser opened the door. An odd silence followed, and then a dull roar of applause as Miss Oldacre was discovered alone on the stage. Jess thought to herself, "I believe I'm going to faint."

"Shush-h-h!" enjoined the dresser, although Jess had said nothing.

"Why?"

"I want to hear the first laugh."

It came presently, a faint trickle of laughter, swelling into the right real thing. That laugh was Florrie's. Muds had gone to the foot of the stairs with Florrie for no other purpose than to wallow in that laugh. How Giggles envied Saucy Sal . . . ! Another laugh, and another. . . .

"Florrie's got over all right," said the dresser.

Jess heard the patter of nimble feet along the passage.

"Miss Yeo."

Jess rose tremblingly from her chair. Was she going to sink or swim?

CHAPTER IV

ENTER CUPID

I

JESS caught a glimpse of her face in the brilliantly-lighted looking-glass before she left the dressing-room. Anything more comically solemn could hardly be conceived. She was feeling abject, trembling with apprehension that she might "dry up," that the first words would never leave her quivering lips. And this was the exact expression wanted, the expression which, so far, she had sought in vain. And, instantly, she realised that her luck still held. Could she keep that expression?

The audience would be prepared for it. At the Castle, Cherrington had noticed that Giggles's entrance had not even provoked a smile. The staid, stodgy county people had missed a point not adequately sharpened. Cherry, at Manchester, introduced a line that made all the difference. Before she appeared, her stage mother said: "Where's Giggles?" and Saucy Sal, in the latest version, exclaimed loudly: "Giggles . . .? I ain't never seen her smile yet. Peelin' taters, she is." Upon this Giggles is summoned.

Jess reached the stage, and took up her position, waiting for her cue. She had to appear before her

mother, only to be dismissed. She was "on" for less than a minute with one line to say.

"Giggles . . ."

Jess went on. Had she kept the right expression, the queer combination of misery and solemnity? She emerged from the scullery, facing the audience, standing still, vacantly staring.

A roar of laughter greeted her.

Cherrington, standing back in his box, ravaged by anxiety, feeling his heart thumping against his shirt front, forgot everything except Jess's face. He, too, roared with laughter. How had she done it—the little rogue? Had she dared, in defiance of authority, to keep this amazing expression back, to hide it? He could hardly believe this. Swift wits leapt to a more reasonable explanation, but not, as we know, the true one. Jess had the supreme gift, so rare. She became Giggles. For the moment it was impossible to think of her as Jess.

The laughter died down. Giggles was invited to "hop it." How would she deliver her line? Cherry could see people in the stalls leaning forward to catch her first words. They came drawlingly, stolidly, and, best of all, with clearest articulation:

"You ain't Gawd."

The audience laughed louder than before. Pellie, quite as solemn as Giggles, said to Cherry:

"She's got 'em—she's got 'em. Will she hold her laugh?"

Giggles stood on one leg, scratching herself with the other.

"Yus, I am," said Miss Oldacre. "You 'op it." Giggles gulped and seemed to shrink. The big

house, from pit to gallery, was bubbling with amusement. At rehearsals, Jess had turned and disappeared into the scullery. But her amazing reception put to flight careful instructions. Appetite for laughs becomes inordinate with the oldest stagers. Imagine the craving and measure it, if you can, with beginners. Staring at her mother, pop-eyed and open-mouthed, Jess hopped backwards into the scullery and vanished amid tumultuous cheers and laughter.

Safely "off" she nearly fainted. Muds, however, ministered to her. Out of a capacious pocket, she fished up a flask.

"Take one little whack," she whispered.

Jess obeyed and choked, but impending collapse was averted. Muds said emphatically, in a whisper that seemed to Jess loud as the crack of doom:

"You've made a big hit, dear. And I know."

The stage hands, the leading man and lady waiting for their cue, smiled pleasantly. Muds went on whispering:

"You're quite all right now, ain't you? Come over queer, and no wonder. Oh! don't I know the feelin'. . . !"

Soon, she would be on again. To appear when she wasn't wanted, to be rebuked, and then to disappear, was exacted of Giggles in the first act. The difficulty, as Crewe pointed out, lay in varying gestures and inflections. But she had one short scene with the leading lady, a high-born dame, in which she had to answer the ill-considered questions which the wife of Dives so often puts to the daughter of Lazarus.

How would she emerge from this ordeal? In its way the little scene was extremely funny, and a sort of competition for laughs between the two actresses. Jess, as Cherry knew, possessed a very lively sense of humour, which would wreck the scene if it peeped out of Giggles. At The Castle, this scene had missed fire. Cherry, very disconsolate, had proposed cutting it, but, fortunately, both Crewe and Pellie objected.

At Manchester it went gloriously. What Crewe had foreseen came home to the author. Jess had the best part, from an actor's point of view, in the comedy. A really skilful and experienced dramatist would have built his play round this delightfully stolid personality. Why hadn't he done it?

There were many calls after the first act, and Cherry rushed up to the dressing-room. Muds appeared at the door.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Cherrington. I suppose you *must* come in. Florrie, put a shawl over your shoulders, child!"

Cherry entered to find Florrie in camisole and petticoat, munching chocolates. Jess was putting on a pair of stockings with many holes in them, and, from an ordinary mother's point of propriety, not fit to be seen by a young and excitable man. Seeing Cherry, she covered herself with confusion, no shawl being provided for her.

"You're two darlings!" said Cherry fervently. "I could hug both of you."

"None o' that," said Muds.

"I don't mind," giggled Florrie.

Cherry, however, restrained himself, but not in speech. The house was very favourable. Pummy was satisfied. The two acts to follow were admittedly better than the first. If Crewe had been present, he would be ready to sign the contract for the London production. Pummy would wire him after the last curtain.

All this was interlarded with little compliments to both the girls, beaming smiles, and the reiterated injunction—"Keep it up."

Finally, Muds pushed him from the room. And, immediately, the irrepressible Florrie attacked Jess.

"Hug me? He was crazy to hug you. And you sat there blinkin' at him."

"If my mother could have seen me . . . !"

"Bashful little puss," continued Florrie. "Well, he saw more of us than he ever saw before—and what of it? I ain't ashamed o' what God has given me. I wish my boy had been here."

Jess grasped an opportunity.

"Which boy, Florrie?"

There were photographs of half a dozen boys on Miss Osborne's dressing-table. Florrie considered the question seriously, saying, in a sentimental tone:

"Really and truly, I think I like Harry best."

Harry, in the eyes of Jess, was the least attractive of Florrie's admirers. She wondered why he had evoked sentiment from this hardened little flirt, and said so.

"Harry ain't a window-dresser. See? No talker, neither. And so respectable."

Muds sighed.

"I think the world and all of that," she observed.

The voice of the call-girl echoed shrilly along the passage.

"Second act."

II

The second act held drama, and accordingly went well. Pellie rubbed his hands, saying to Cherry:

"Tension, my boy, tension. Nothing like it. It isn't comedy that makes a play. Your story is being capitally told. I saw one young woman in the dress circle mopping her eyes with a brand new pair of white gloves. Tears and laughter—tears and laughter."

In the interval, Cherry was interviewed. The pressman shook hands:

"Congrats, Mr. Cherrington. Manchester, let me tell you, sir, is not lightly moved. We're critical down here, and proud of it. If your third act holds 'em, I'll offer you a thousand pounds for a one-third interest in your fees, film rights included."

Cherry was reasonably certain that the speaker would be hard put to it to find a thousand pence, but he didn't say so. Modestly, he accepted the congratulations.

"What, sir, does it feel like to be a successful dramatist?"

"I'm not that, yet."

"You will be to-morrow. I stake my reputation on it. Can you give me any information about the young lady who plays Giggles?"

"This is her first appearance as a professional."

"And not her last. She has made friends with

Manchester. I should like her photograph and yours, sir, for our Sunday edition."

Cherry laughed.

"If the third act goes better than the second, you shall have them."

The third act satisfied the expectation aroused by the second. And when Jess smiled, revealing her dimples and her pretty teeth, the gallery howled with delight. Owbridge, after many calls, insisted that she should take one call alone. Cherry pushed her on, whispering: "Smile—smile, for all you're worth!" But for the moment she couldn't. She faced the audience solemnly. But as the house rose at her, she smiled artlessly, like a happy child. A voice from the pit floated to her:

"Carn't yer giggle, lass?"

Jess giggled.

There were more calls before the author was summoned. He couldn't complain of his reception. The crowd loves youth, and Cherry looked absurdly young and happy. A speech was demanded, but Cherry shook his head, and bowed. A memorable *première* was over.

The generous Pellie provided champagne and oysters in the parlour. Every incident in the performance was gone over. Miss Oldacre said with finality:

"Jess put us to bed."

"If you say that, I shall put myself to bed."

"Bed . . .! We're going to make a night of it."

Pumford joined them, after his arduous labours with the gentlemen of the Press. He promised favourable notices and predicted good business.

He had sent a heartening wire to Sir Felix. The only shadow cast upon the supper party fell when he revealed the truth. Indisposition had kept Sir Felix in his London house.

"Is Sir Felix ill?" Jess asked.

"Indisposed," replied the cautious Pummy.

The little man drank a glass of champagne and departed.

With him vanished the shadow. To Jess, the night seemed glorious day. She had to pinch herself to make sure that she was awake and not dreaming. And yet, behind her triumph, percolating through it, was the memory of Cherry's kiss. Since that, they had not been alone together. But she was conscious of a change in him and in herself. The kiss, somehow, had awakened her. Even now, she was not certain that it was a lover's kiss. Kissing was taken for what it might be worth—in stageland. Indeed, after the show, when all the performers stood upon the stage with the curtain down, Florrie had kissed the author, who accepted the salute as if on parade.

Again and again, during supper, her eyes met the eyes of Cherry. It almost seemed to Jess that he looked at her with the pride and joyousness of possession. His eyes said plainly: "You are my beloved Giggles." Of course they might be saying: "You are my beloved Jess." For the first time, she envisaged her dual personality as actress and woman. But somehow instinct told her that the perplexing problem would be solved before this wonderful night was over. He would see her alone, and then she would know.

Meanwhile the others talked shop with increasing energy and enthusiasm. Crewe had let his theatre for six months. Probably, he would present Cherry's play in September. Unfortunately, there was no part in it for him, and, if he recovered health and energy, he might wish to play again after so long a rest. His public would expect that. To find another theatre would be very difficult and expensive. Both Cherrington and Pell raised excited voices against this scarcity of theatres, a scarcity caused by the inordinate demand for revue and musical comedy. They rent in twain managers who produced Yankee plays with nothing in them but "punch." They fell tooth and nail upon others who relied on pruriency and pathology to fill their stalls with neurotic women. Miss Oldacre calmed them. Jess thought how sensible she was, how broad-minded, how sweetly reasonable.

"I have no patience with you two—none. It is for the public to decide what they want. As for brains, it takes the best to make a success of anything. I have never played in revue or musical comedy. I have never been 'featured' in films. But I make my curtsy to all the clever, amusing people who shine in places where I should certainly fizzle out. As for you, Pellie, you are old enough to know better. You had my photograph under your pillow when I played hardly anything but Shakespeare. And you bestowed the same honour upon Kate Vaughan and Nellie Farren. You were wiser then than you are now."

She smiled so graciously that Pellie relit his cigar

which had gone out. Cherry rose solemnly, captured her hand, and kissed it.

"If Miss Oldacre lives, we will let live."

"He is good-tempered," thought Jess.

III

When Jess announced her positive determination to go to bed, Cherry got up with her, and accompanied her into the passage. Jess had not far to go, for Miss Oldacre's bedroom was next to the parlour, and Jess had the room beyond the intervening bathroom. She had merely to walk a few steps down the main corridor and turn sharp to the right along a small passage. When they reached the passage, Jess held out her hand.

Cherry saw a window at the end of the passage, and through it that "orbed maiden," the Moon. Under the window was a window-seat.

"Come," he whispered.

"It's so late."

He took her hand and led her to the window-seat.

"Look at me, dear Jess."

She raised her eyes to his, faintly smiling. His laughing face had become very serious.

"Were you angry when I kissed you?"

"N-no."

"What did you think about it?"

"I thought nothing . . . much. The dresser said you were quite the gentleman. Under the circumstances it was, perhaps, a gentlemanly kiss. Did any grease-paint come off?"

He ignored this. Under his persistent glance,

she became slightly nervous. A lover was revealing himself unmistakably.

"Jess, you are still a mystery to me," his voice thrilled. "Perhaps, I am a mystery to you. But to-night, this wonderful night, I want to be crystal clear. How could I speak before to-night?—and even now we don't know what to-morrow may hold."

Her eyes became troubled. She was moved. George had never really thrilled her. Was this love, blinded love, stealing upon her a-tiptoe, filching from her peace of mind and body?

He went on very softly, close to her, but not too close:

"To-morrow might hold so much—so much for you and me. I have thought of that to-morrow from the first. Do you remember when I said: 'So, you're Giggles,' and your quaint answer: 'Yes, my lord?' You captured me then, little Jess."

"Cherry . . ."

"Yes?"

"You are making love to me, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. And it frightens you."

"It does. Cherry, I am ever so fond of you. But—don't touch me! Are we our true selves to-night? I—I don't know. We seem to have come together in a sense that I can't yet understand. I have looked upon it as a delightful partnership. We have worked hard. I believe, I know, that I have been happy with you—happier, perhaps, than I have ever been. How dear your friendship is to me I can measure. But love . . ."

"Love is immeasurable, Jess."

She whispered, almost inaudibly :

" I want to love you, if I can. Because of that, be patient with me."

Her sincerity, her consideration for him, were so obvious that he sprang up, alert to meet her wishes, aflame to prove his devotion.

" Good night, you darling."

She sat alone in the moonlight.

IV

Jess read the notices of the play, next morning, in bed. Taken as a whole they were favourable, although the *Manchester Trustee* was slightly patronising. . . .

" The author, Mr. Arthur Cherrington, is a young man, and this is his first serious contribution to contemporary drama. We wish, therefore, to deal with him tenderly. His work shows great promise, but, as yet, it is, technically speaking, very uneven. He has much to learn about construction and more still about what we may term dramatic economy. We marked many superfluous lines, introduced designedly to provoke the easy laugh. In this comedy there is an excess of exposition. But the author has a sense of the stage and a freshness of outlook which we can commend heartily. Let him beware, however, of concentrating too much upon merely stage effects and devices, whether they be fresh or stale. There is no school for dramatists or novelists other than life, the life beyond the

footlights and independent of them. We would urge Mr. Cherrington to study life at first hand, and to suck from that teeming source the true inspiration. We imagine that he has studied rather the work of other dramatists. To use an expression of the hunting-field, he has been speaking to a heel scent. . . . Of the company, who worked together admirably, we can say many pleasant things. . . . Last, but assuredly not least, we come to the delightful *Giggles*. She is a real creation, happily conceived and happily presented. We should have liked much more of her. Miss Jessica Yeo is, we understand, a beginner. She should go far, because her work gives evidence of sincerity and intelligence. We congratulate her *con amore*. . . ."

Jess, smiling inwardly and outwardly, took her nail-scissors and cut out this notice to send to her mother. None of the Yeos had travelled to Manchester, and Jess well understood the underlying reason of this. Mrs. Yeo and her eldest son would have "assisted," had they not apprehended disaster. What effect her success would have, she was, as yet, unable to determine. The fry would "buck" about it in Sloden-Pauncefort. The Olympians would preserve a dignified and discreet silence. One swallow could hardly be expected to turn the winter of their discontent into summer.

Hardly had Jess read the other notices when Miss Oldacre came in and kissed her. The great actress, looking younger than ever in a wonderful rose-coloured silk dressing-gown, sat down upon the foot of the bed.

"I wish you were my daughter," she said.

With such speeches Nan Oldacre sweetened many hearts. Dare we indict her sincerity? Fortunately, there is no necessity to raise such an ungracious question. Always, she conveyed a sense of sincerity. Kind words flew from a kind heart. She continued:

"You deserved your triumph, Jess. And I rejoice in it, but . . ."

"But?"

"I did not sleep very well last night. I never can sleep after these excitements. I like to lie still, cosily snuggling up against warm memories, spreading my hands above the glowing embers. But I want to talk about you, not myself, partly because you have carried me back to my own youth—still near to me although really so far away. Tell me, if you can, how you feel about the stage? What does this first success mean to you?"

Jess hesitated. She had not yet marshalled her thoughts. Her brain was still buzzing. She could hear the cheers and laughter of the audience.

"I—I don't know."

"How could you? But I have been through this; and I am an old woman who forgets her lines now, who can only accept little parts, but who never forgets the earlier chapters of her life. I belong to a family of actors. I am very proud of that. You don't. From what you have told me, your people have a prejudice against the stage. It is quite likely that if you win your way to heights you will lose them, and with them what may be called the amenities of a simple happy life."

"I understand, Miss Oldacre. It's sweet of you

to talk to me like this. If you will go on a little, I may be able to see things more clearly. Are you warning me against the stage? The Duke of Sloden, I think, meant to do so, but he didn't know how. He—he funkcd it. Because he funkcd it, I was oddly impressed."

"Ah! The Duke of Sloden? A kindly man, with intuitions. Naturally, he doesn't know what I know." She paused for a moment, faintly smiling, obviously selecting her words. She continued slowly: "The stage is an obsession, Jess. Why it should be more so than any other profession, I cannot say. Possibly, because it is a counterfeit presentment of life, touching life at all its edges, and so seldom getting beyond them. Anyway, the constant practice of my profession exacts immense sacrifices. Some of us reach a point when we always act, when we are actually conscious of acting. Many famous actors don't encourage their children to go on the stage. Why? Because they realise this artificiality from which so few escape. It always amuses me to walk down Piccadilly with Charles Fanshawe. He is absurdly self-conscious of the crowd, carrying a pair of ears cocked for the expected whisper: 'That's Fanshawe.' If he is passed by with indifference, he winces. An actress, even more famous, habitually arrives late—even for breakfast. She prefers a good entrance to hot bacon. She has made the most elaborate arrangements for her funeral, so that the last exit may be worthy of her. And I . . ." She laughed and touched her gown. "Well, I discarded my dear old wrapper and put on this, because

I wanted to dress the unsympathetic part of nurse."

"You couldn't be unsympathetic."

"Thanks. To return to you—are you prepared for sacrifices?"

"What sacrifices?"

"Almost everything unconnected with the stage."

"Pellie called that the fourth dimension."

"So it is. Life is a simpler word."

"But surely, Miss Oldacre, an actress does not cut herself off from life and—and love?"

"Life and love? Life is love, and love is life. No; in one sense we don't cut ourselves off from life and love, but we imperil gravely our full realisation of them. The stage tears husband from wife, mother from children. Suppose you were married, with two tinies to whom you had given life, and who exacted in return love, and suppose you had signed on for an American tour—what then?"

"Yes—I see."

"Make no mistake about one thing. An actress must take her call. She must follow her line of destiny, wherever it leads. The dear public must never be disappointed. We have to play when often we should be in bed. And a great part leaves us limp, bloodless, as if some vampire had sucked all energy from us. What is left is given to friends, husband, children. It isn't much, Jess. And then, perhaps, the friends slide from us, the husband leaves us, the children love their nurses. Ah! you will say that we find others, but it's not the same thing, it never can be the same thing. We touch the hem of life, and no virtue comes out of it."

Her soft voice was infinitely sad. And such words coming spontaneously from such a woman, so gracious, so full of love of life, so optimistic, made a deep impression.

"I shall remember," said Jess.

Miss Oldacre's voice became gay.

"There—it's off my chest. Are you pleased with your notices?"

V

At one, Cherrington took Jess out to luncheon. From his manner nobody could have guessed that he was in love. During luncheon he talked of the play and the press notices. Jess had expected from him a querulous note, but, much to her astonishment, he seemed to attach more importance to the censure than the praise.

"That fellow who did the notice in the *Trustee* is dead right. I must suck inspiration from life. I shall scrap my collection of plays. I want to soak myself in life. I wish I knew more about primitive people and new countries. What fun, what experiences we should have, if we could cut loose from civilisation for a year!"

"The Lure of the Wild."

"That sort of thing would bore you, Jess?"

He spoke interrogatively. As she remained silent, he continued in the same tone:

"You have tasted blood; you will want more of it. And, by the way, you will get more of it. I saw Pummy this morning. He is filling up dates. You will be on the road for many months."

"And where will you be?"

"That depends entirely upon a young person who insists that I should be patient. For the moment, you are self-sufficing."

"Am I?"

"You must be. To-night you will count your laughs as Florrie does. That is the beginning of the end."

"What end?"

"The West End. Your ultimate destination."

She regarded him intently.

"Do you want me to get there—ultimately?"

He evaded the question.

"I want you to get what you want; and you will, if you want it hard enough. The want to will and the will to want. It's all in that."

"And what do you want, Cherry?"

"You," he answered fervently.

No lover could have answered more promptly, with such decision. And his eyes met hers hungrily. Yes; she liked him better than she had ever liked George. And he was of finer clay. More, he had an understanding of women, so rare in young men. Her voice was not under perfect control as she went on:

"I believe that. But . . . if you had to choose between me and your work . . . ? You have told me a great deal about your work. I know what it means to you. I remember what you said about journalism. You had reached a point—hadn't you?—when a fair income as a journalist was a certainty, if you stuck tight to journalism."

"Yes. Go on."

"You told me that you had sacrificed some of this income when you seriously took up writing for the stage."

"No regrets there. I looked upon journalism as a means to an end."

"Well, suppose some fairy godmother offered you a choice between journalism and me, and a huge dramatic success without me?"

He frowned slightly. Possibly her quiet tones misled him. He knew that some women—his own mother, for example—set an immense value on an assured income. For her sake, his father had renounced speculation and with it the possibility of making a large fortune. To give his wife peace of mind, Cherrington *père* had stuck to the safe ruts of an old-fashioned broker. Mrs. Yeo, of course, from the little he had seen of her, impressed him as just such another. The Cedars sufficed her. These thoughts flitted in and out of his mind, perplexing him horribly. He answered with a shade of irritability:

"Bother your fairy godmother! To me, you are part—far and away the greatest part—of my ambitions. I want a big success to share with you. Mere comfort doesn't appeal to me. Comfort means compromise. It's playing pat-ball with life. I hate pat-ball. I want you desperately. I tried to suppress that, to hide it from you, till there was something to offer, but last night swept me off my feet. You are ambitious. I know it. There is the same driving power in you that's in me. You wouldn't be satisfied as the wife of a journalist. Let's go for the big things—together, partners

through thick and thin. I'll say this, and swear to it—I'd sooner fail in the big things with you than win the world without you."

She replied shyly:

"I wanted to hear you say that. And if—if you had sworn that you would take just comfort and me, I should not have believed you. Now—be patient a little longer."

They lingered over the pleasant little meal, talking once more as pals. Pummy, so Cherry informed Jess, had prepared a contract for the London production. Neither Sir Felix nor Cherry had signed it.

"Pummy is a rare pincher. He wants the American rights, film rights, amateur rights—everything. I shall get my royalties, and it saves me a lot of trouble. We are booked up well for to-night. That's wonderful. A second night is generally a frost, and the house full of paper. It's in the air that our show's a winner. All the same, towns vary tremendously. What goes in Manchester may be snowed in in Newcastle. However, we shall have a run. The beggars in some of the big towns wouldn't book a date till we made good here. And business is booming in the provinces. The small towns are full of money. But our cast is not a cheap one."

Jess told him of her interview with Pumford. Cherry laughed.

"I wondered how you had got at him. Really, that offer to reduce your screw captured him. He speaks of you solemnly as—straight. He's your friend. Clever little witch you are . . . ! Shall we look at some pictures?"

They did so. To Jess this was a test. She hated to look at pictures, or to listen to music, with her own people. And, long ago, the discovery that her tastes in everything connected with art differed from the Yeo standards had been very disconcerting. To her delight, Cherry lingered before the pictures which appealed to her; he seemed to look at them with her eyes, to feel, as she did, certain effects of light and colour. He talked volubly about vibrations, about the harmonious relation between colour and sound and form, particularly form.

"If you sprinkle a metal disc with powdered chalk, attach a tuning-fork to it, and draw the bow of a violin across the fork, you get an amazing pattern, which never varies till you change the note. Do you know that the vibrations which produce the low G, for instance, will give you the ultra violet ray if you multiply them enough? I'd like to go into that. To me, nine times out of ten, in a big spectacular show, the colours of the costumes seem to bark at the music and the words. Those things could be co-ordinated scientifically. Most of our stage settings are wrong. Barker is moving in the right direction; so is Craig, although I can't keep step with him."

"You always return to the stage, Cherry."

"So I do. Does that bore you?"

"No; but I don't want to be entirely obsessed by it."

She repeated, almost verbatim, what Miss Oldacre had said, with a comment of her own.

"She was warning me."

"Um! She didn't set forth the attractive side.

Take her own life. She has had an astounding innings, not over yet. She knows everybody. At a time when she might be crouching over a fire knitting stockings for her grandchildren, she is a world-wide favourite, an immense influence, an arc-light. You can't have it both ways. If you're the old-fashioned sort of girl, if you're afraid of storm and stress, why, then, chuck the stage. You can't step gingerly on to it, picking your way, lifting your skirts, shrinking from dust and dirt. You must carry a high head, prance on, push your way to the front, hold your own the more firmly because you have had to fight for it."

"Yes, yes; I feel like that."

"Of course you do. Confound these craners at fences! I have no use for them, male or female."

His firm chin protruded; his blue eyes flashed. Jess, watching him critically, thought to herself: "He can't fail; and I, perhaps, can help him. He has chosen me as a helpmeet. I shall love helping him. But why can't I fling my arms round his neck and tell him so?"

Presently he began to talk of Florrie, praising her performance till Jess winced under the first tiny stab of jealousy. Florrie, of course, was a type, with grease-paint in her marrow. She could play low comedy with a raciness and humour hard to beat. But Florrie, being a common little thing, could never soar above such parts as Saucy Sal; never earn more than the salary that was paid for such parts. She was an honest worker, a credit to the "profesh." From Florrie, Cherry passed swiftly to the leading man and leading lady. They, too, were types,

provincial favourites, unable to tickle town palates, suburban rather than urban. . . .

The time passed quickly. It was almost five when they returned to the hotel.

VI

Cherry left Jess in the hall. She was crossing to the lift, when the page-boy approached her with a pert grin upon his round face.

"A military gentleman to see you, miss. He's in the drorin' room, and he's ordered tea for two."

Jess had left word in the office that she would be back for tea.

"What name?"

"Capting Apperton."

Instantly, she experienced an odd shock. The presence of George disconcerted her. He would bring with him Sloden-Pauncefort, that Arcadian atmosphere, softly sensuous in its way, which seemed so remote from Manchester. But how friendly and jolly of him to come! Quite possibly, he had read a paragraph in a London paper. He wanted to share her small triumph.

She found him in the drawing-room, very voluble.

"You dear old Jess. I wanted to weigh in last night, but my colonel is a heartless beast. How are things going?"

"Don't you know?"

"How could I? I only arrived about twenty minutes ago."

She laughed at him.

"Are all the papers in Manchester sold out?"

"By Jove! Never thought of that. I suppose you worried through, eh?"

"Oh yes; but I nearly died of funk."

"I'm coming to your show to-night. I ought to be given a free seat, because I shall be worth a tenner to the box-office. I'm prepared to shout myself hoarse."

They sat down. Jess took from her bag the press-cutting not yet dispatched to Sloden-Pauncefort. George read it agape with surprise. Jess could see that she had suddenly expanded in his eyes. Awe informed his genial voice.

"I never expected this."

"I'm sure you didn't."

"This'll make 'em sit up and howl at The Cedars."

For five minutes, till tea appeared, he could talk of nothing else. Quite unconsciously, he presented for the inspection of Jess a queerly distorted image of herself as she appeared to him before her triumph. And she recognised a portrait which Sloden-Pauncefort would pronounce to be an excellent likeness. George added one ludicrous touch after another, till she stopped him with a protest.

"What a fool you thought me!"

He denied this emphatically.

"Nothing of the sort." His tone became sentimental. "You know jolly well that I look upon you as my best pal. Am I the sort of cove to take up with a fool?"

Jess replied shyly:

"More unlikely things have happened."

George accepted this seriously. He bent forward, whispering:

"That was a blow over the heart, Jess."

"Heavens, what do you mean?"

"Irene Seaton has chucked me. I took up with her, as you know. And she is a fool. But I never thought of her as a pal."

Jess assimilated this quickly.

"George, dear, do you call her a fool because she has chucked you?"

He acknowledged this with a laugh. Jess decided that the "chucking" had not caused lacerations other than those inflicted upon a youthful officer's self-esteem. Details were forthcoming. The young lady was engaged to be married to an actor. A mummer, not in the first flight, had been preferred to the hussar. And the heavens had not fallen . . . ! George, it soon transpired, had offered his hand and fortunes, present and prospective, under conditions. The regiment would go to India when Peace was definitely signed. Miss Irene Seaton was invited to sail with it, dropping for ever, as a star, from the theatrical firmament. Jess dared not laugh.

"Did you expect her to jump into your arms?"

"If you could see the boulder she has chosen . . . !"

"Perhaps I shall."

He raised his eyebrows.

"I mean, if I play in London."

"But, hang it, you're not going on with this?"

"Why not?"

He became explosive. The stage was no fit place for Miss Jessica Yeo. Look at Irene! Look at her . . . ! Captain Apperton hazarded the

conjecture that Miss Yeo might marry a mummer. Jess listened, amused and edified. Apparently, the hussar regarded all mummers as rogues and vagabonds. This was the first effect of the "chucking." Jess, he went on, had come to Manchester for a lark.

"I haven't got the 'bird,'" murmured Jess, using an expression of Florrie's.

"You wanted excitements. That's all right. Quite all right up to a point. If I were foot-loose, I'd join you."

"We should add a few laughs, and every laugh is worth five pounds to the box-office."

"I tell you I shouldn't mind doing the provinces with you. But London . . . !"

"Keep cool! A London contract has been drawn up by Sir Felix Crewe's business manager. It isn't signed, but I have every reason to believe it will be. If you doubt me, you can ask Mr. Cherrington."

"Who's Mr. Cherrington?"

"The author."

George asked for another cup of tea, and glanced at his watch.

"I must order a nice little dinner. You'll dine with me, eh?"

"No, you must dine with us. Miss Oldacre may sweeten your opinion of mummers."

"Miss Oldacre? She isn't playing in Manchester?"

"Indeed, she is—in our company. What a profound interest you have taken in our show!"

George looked slightly aggrieved, but his tone became sentimental again.

"I travelled from Canterbury to see you, Jess.

Honestly, I thought you might need a bit of bucking up. This success of yours is a knock-out. But I'm jolly proud of you. And, of course, it's a great honour to meet Miss Oldacre."

VII

At dinner, rather a hurried meal and horribly early, George made an excellent impression. He was accepted as the pal of Jess, an old friend. Instinct, however, whispered to Jess that George might become the lover again at a moment's notice. Secretly, she was delighted with his manners and deportment. In Miss Oldacre's presence, "swank" was impossible. George was lured on to talk of the Retreat from Mons, and his modest recital provoked in Jess the reflection—why is he so self-assured about things that he doesn't understand? George never "bucked" about his horsemanship, and blushed when it happened to be praised.

He remained with Pell and Cherrington to smoke a cigar after Jess and Miss Oldacre left for the theatre. In the taxi, Jess had to answer questions:

"Why don't you encourage this nice boy?"

"He doesn't need encouragement."

"So much the better. I have no patience with shy men. Tell me all about him and his people."

Jess did so. She liked all the Appertons; and she loved the old manor.

"You come round a corner, and suddenly see the house across the lawns, through some great elms on each side. I used to dream of it as the home of the Sleeping Beauty. It's full of Tudor panelling,

and there's a big chest in the hall which makes one think of 'The Mistletoe Bough.' "

" And this is the eldest son ? "

" He is now. "

" I suppose there is mistletoe in the forest of Ys ? Has this nice young fellow never taken advantage of that ? "

Jess remained silent. Miss Oldacre rang a tiny peal of laughter.

" He has . . . ! I am sure of it. Oh, Jess, do tell me all about it. There is just time. "

Thus adjured and unable to resist such a charmer, Jess was beguiled into confession. To save her life, she couldn't have spoken of Cherrington. And Miss Oldacre, brilliant star, twinkled high above the gossip of the theatre. When Jess finished, Miss Oldacre said maternally :

" *On revient.* Your George has come to Manchester to see you, not our play. "

The taxi drew up at the stage door.

VIII

As Jess ascended the stone stairs that led to the dressing-room, she passed Pummy. He gave her a curt nod. She was so astonished that she held up her hand.

" What is it ? "

His voice was as curt as the nod.

" Mr. Pumford, have I offended you ? "

His face relaxed.

" Lord bless you, no. I'm worried. When I'm worried, I become an unholy terror. "

" Worried ? About our show ? "

" Oh no. That's going strong. I can't share my worry with you—not on these stairs, at any rate."

He bustled off. Jess supposed that Pummy might be worrying about his wife or his children. It was difficult to envisage him as a paterfamilias. He seemed to be born to wear evening clothes and a white waistcoat and a shiny tall hat. Or to sit at his desk drawing up contracts. Perhaps, at this moment, Mrs. Pumford was ill. He had left her, as she knew, to go round the world with Sir Felix. He was Crewe's devoted slave. Crewe, the mere man, could rend asunder those whom God had joined together. Miss Oldacre was right. The stage exacted sacrifices from everybody connected with it . . .

The irrepressible Florrie banished such reflections. All her notices were pasted on to a large piece of cardboard. She effervesced with excitement and exuberance.

" It means London town. Muds says so."

Muds nodded solemnly.

" What does your boy say about it ? "

It occurred to Jess that happy chance had furnished her with an opportunity to throw dust into the sparkling orbs of Miss Osborne.

" You can ask him presently. Captain Apperton will be here before the first act. I thought you wouldn't mind."

" Captain Apperton ? "

" He has come all the way from Canterbury to see me."

"Well, I never . . . ! Pore Mr. Cherrington !"

The dust, such as it was, effectively blinded Florrie for the moment. She, too, wanted to know all about Captain Apperton. Was he rich and handsome? Had he given Jess a ring? And where was it? Did he wear a moustache? Jess dealt faithfully with these questions till George tapped at the door. He made a superb entrance, a smart cavalry officer in khaki. Miss Osborne had never seen such brilliant boots, although her eyes didn't linger long upon them. George had been in dressing-rooms before, and knew how to make himself agreeable. He perpetrated one small blunder, mistaking Muds for a dresser. In less than five minutes he was carried off by Pell.

"Your boy?" exclaimed Florrie.

"One of them," Jess replied casually.

Florrie feared that Mr. Cherrington's nose must be paining him. The call-girl's voice echoed along the passage :

"Beginners, please."

Muds remained in her corner, beaming at Jess, now no longer a rival of her ewe-lamb. This captain would elope with Giggles. Probably pore Mr. Cherrington and he would fight a duel. The captain would cut him down. Fancy transported her swiftly to the snow scene in *The Corsican Brothers*.

Jess, dabbing at her face with a huge powder-puff, could see Muds reflected in the big looking-glass. She interpreted the beaming smile as proof of contentment. This struck her as amazing. What a life! To come to the theatre for seven or eight performances each week, to sit in a corner, to

exchange gossip with dressers, to look at the picture papers !

" Do you find it dull, Mrs. Toop ? "

" Me ? Why, no. It's dull when I can't come to the theatre. Don't worry about me, dear. I'm ever so happy, because we're in for a run. What worries me is unpaid rehearsals and short runs. That's crool, if you like. Rehearse for six weeks for nothing, and three weeks' run to bad business. That pips me."

Her face grew lugubrious at the mere recollection of such catastrophes. Jess looked almost as solemn. With her alert imagination, she was trying to " corner " herself, to behold herself as a looker on, a sort of camp follower, in the great theatrical army. It was hard to believe that Mrs. Toop had ever played leading boy. Nothing remained of her many charms except her smile and her small feet, of which she was immensely proud. And yet she was " ever so happy," simply because Florrie had made a hit and the future for a few months was reasonably assured.

" She is just part, a spare part, of an immense machine, grinding on and on, rain or shine."

That was Jess's thought, with the inevitable corollary: " Are we women to be regarded as machinery, mere cogs on the wheel of life ? Must we accept resignedly, contentedly, the inscrutable decrees of destiny ? What would happen to Mrs. Toop if Florrie failed to earn a salary ? "

The call-girl cut short these reflections.

IX

The second performance went better than the first. This ought to be so, because the players have lost nervousness and they know when and where the laughs are likely to come. The audience, too, is less critical. But if the rehearsals have been too great a strain on the endurance of the company, if the players at the *première* are keyed to too high a pitch, the reaction follows. Much, also, depends upon the play. More, perhaps, on the audience. Anyway, Manchester came to the second night, prepared by a kind press, to enjoy itself. And Manchester was not disappointed. The advance booking had begun. Pell said to Cherrington:

"The London contract will be signed to-morrow. It's a cert."

Miss Oldacre was of the same opinion. Felix Crewe, whether he could act himself or not, was too keen a business man to "turn down" a money-making comedy. And, possibly, of all the great towns, Manchester was the surest index of what London would accept. Manchester, admittedly, had a "nose" for a sound play—a nose that sniffed contemptuously at bad craftsmanship. All, therefore, was well.

George, need it be added, exhibited enthusiasm and amazement. He, too, failed to recognise Giggles as Jess. Leaping, hot-foot, from one extreme to the other, he was prepared to acclaim Jess as a "winner." Her performance astounded this good, honest fellow. Jess was better than Irene Seaton! . . . Why had he underrated Jess?

What a 'little topper she was! Pretty as a peach, too, even in her rags. And, quite apart from her acting, Jess in Manchester was not the Jess of Sloden-Pauncefort. She had become animated; charged, so to speak, with electricity; a magnet intensely attractive. Pell, who had known George all his life, commented sagaciously on this:

"Jess has personality. It gets over. The little dear has come to life. For the first time, she is really living. And I scraped the moss off her. I found the nugget."

George assimilated these mixed metaphors. Pellie continued:

"She may go very far."

George was startled. At that moment he was thinking: "Why shouldn't Jess go to India with me?" He murmured absently: "How far?"

"Round the world. There must be no hurry about that. For a year or two she must stick to London like a leech—establish herself. If she does that, if she captures them, let her cut loose. A popular actress in every sense of the word should be properly produced. I propose to run Jess. I shall run her for all she's worth. And it will be a labour of love for me."

All this was said after the last curtain, when George was waiting in the foyer of the theatre. He intended to escort Jess back to her hotel.

Confounded by Pellie's proposals, he blurted out:

"A labour of love?" A horrible suspicion made his knees as wax. "I say, old chap, are you engaged to Jess?—What?"

Pellie's laugh exorcised suspicion.

"Lord, no." Then, with extreme gravity, sinking his voice, he began to play Banderillero, deftly planting little darts into the taurine George.

"Marriage would wreck everything. I shall guard against that. She must give undivided energies and love, *and love*, to her right job. I see no reason why she shouldn't play Juliet, but not off the stage, my boy. You, as her old pal, agree with me, don't you?"

George, head down, pawing the earth, ready to charge, bellowed at him:

"No; I don't."

"Bless my soul!" Pellie adjusted a neat pince-nez and stared at an infuriated animal, who went on bellowing:

"I have never heard such damned wicked rot in all my life. Here's a little darling who's built from the ground up to make some decent chap the happiest man in the world, to be the mother of babies as sweet as herself, to—to bloom like a rose in a lovely garden, not to wither in a beastly theatre. I know all about theatres. I know what hell the stage plays with girls. I know—curse it!—I'm too rattled to go on. Run Jess! . . . Produce Jess . . . God intended her to do the right sort of producing. Don't you interfere with God!"

He mopped his forehead, glaring savagely at the astonished little man. Out of the fullness of heart had proceeded speech. Pellie said quietly:

"All right, George, go slow! I can understand your point of view. You think it's the mission of a woman to make a decent chap, like yourself happy, eh?"

"Of course I do," growled George.

"And suppose you can't make her happy? Has that occurred to you? If there is one fact that sticks out of life, as I see it, it's this: What's sauce for the gander is no longer sauce for the goose. Your modern girl disdains this notion of consecrating all her energies to making men happy and comfy. You may not know it—I am sure you don't—but Jess is modern, and amazingly intelligent. I should like to rub this well into you, but gently, without breaking your sensitive skin. Are you keen about your profession?"

"You know I am."

"Good! Now, for the sake of argument, suppose that you were head over heels in love with Jess."

George's face relaxed.

"That's easy to suppose. I was in love with her once—madly. I might fall in love again quite easily, and even more madly."

Pellie smiled. A glimpse into George's heart was vouchsafed him.

"Right! If your love for her was worth having you would consider her happiness, wouldn't you?"

"I should."

"Good again! Here, then, we have two persons about to go into partnership. And each has a profession. I don't wish to be offensive, but, humanly speaking, Jess has a bigger chance of making an enduring success in her profession than you have in yours. Anyway, for the purposes of our little argument I ask you to concede that."

"It may be true."

"Thanks! Now, if it were obvious to you that Jess felt about her profession the same enthusiasm you feel for yours, would you be prepared to chuck the service and devote yourself to her, ministering to her as you would expect her to minister to you if she went with your regiment to India? And, by the way, English roses do not exactly bloom on the Indian plains."

"You ask me if I would chuck the service, and hang about theatres for the rest of my life? Most certainly not."

Pellie continued quietly:

"I expected that answer. It comes down the ages. It's rather moth-eaten. It means, simply, that men, like yourself, still exact from women more than they are prepared to give. You asked me just now not to interfere with the Deity. If Omnipotence intended all women to be wives and mothers, He would have ordained that Jacks in England should be as plentiful as Jills. I may be wrong about Jess. The sheltered, simple life of Sloden-Pauncefort might make for her happiness, but I don't think so. Why did she leave it—against great pressure? Because there's something in her, something indefinable at present, which must find expression. My humble mind can't apprehend the possibility of a man interfering with Omnipotence and Omniscience, but I do think that it is wicked and foolish to interfere with a woman unless you are absolutely sure that such interference will make for her lasting happiness. I expect we shall find Jess waiting for us at the stage door."

X

The night being fine, Jess had decided to walk back to the hotel. After the heat of the theatre the cool breeze of the street was delightfully refreshing. It struck her as odd that Pellie should play gooseberry. And she wondered vaguely what had happened to Cherrington. Probably he had some business to attend to with Pummy. George had been invited to sup with the quartet, and round off the square.

George strode along martially and in silence. Pellie prattled as usual. He had come to the conclusion that George was quite likely to propose to Jess *au clair de la lune*. And, possibly, he overestimated George's physical attractiveness. What a bull of a fellow he was! It had not yet occurred to him that Cherrington might marry Jess. He believed that Cherry was obsessed with his dramatic ambitions.

As they left the stage door, a gaunt, shabby man accosted them—one of the "has beens" of the profession, derelict after many voyages. He spoke in the deep diapason tones of the ex-tragedian.

"I apologise for troubling you," he said magnificently. "I am Wimpole."

The name made no impression upon George and Jess. Pellie stopped instantly.

"You are John Wimpole?"

"I am John Wimpole. I am what is left of him. You, sir, may have seen me play."

"I have. But what can I do for you, Mr. Wimpole?"

"If my performance of any part happened to please you, sir, I should not feel offended if you offered me a night's board and lodging, or its equivalent."

Pellie was not proof against this poignant appeal, delivered with sonorous impressiveness. He pressed something into a thin hand.

"Might I ask the name of my benefactor?"

"My name is Pell."

"Ah! You produced this play. My congratulations. I shall not forget you, Mr. Pell."

He said this with the air of an emperor who had left his purse at home and who might confer some distinguished honour upon the privileged donor of a small grant in aid. Then he stalked away into the shadows.

"I never heard of John Wimpole," said George.

Pellie said grimly:

"You would hear from him, if he knew your name. I shall. He was something of a star in his day."

They reached the hotel. In the hall, Cherrington was standing near the lift, evidently waiting for them. Jess thought that he must have a bad headache, but he said nothing till they reached the parlour, which was empty.

"Where is Miss Oldacre?" asked Jess.

"I have very bad news," said Cherrington.

They looked anxiously into his pale, troubled face.

"Sir Felix Crewe died of heart failure about two hours ago."

CHAPTER V

GEORGE PROPOSES

I

DETAILS were forthcoming on the morrow. Crewe had been seriously ill for three days, but the fact had been kept carefully from the Press. Pumford of all those at Manchester had known that the heart of an overworked man was steadily failing. The end came swiftly and painlessly.

Miss Oldacre was very unhappy, and what she said to Jess may be recorded as the opinion of Crewe's intimate friends.

"Felix, my dear, was something of a martyr to his profession. From the very first, as I well remember, he took his art seriously. Everybody in his theatre knew that. He attended, personally, to the myriad petty details. That is why he succeeded greatly as a manager, and that is why, also, as an actor he remained to the end—himself. He never attempted character parts; he knew, perhaps, his limitations; and he knew—none better—what he could do, and how to do it. He cherished and upheld the dignity of his profession. He fought tooth and nail for the rank and file. Of course advantage was taken of this. Work was thrust upon him which a less unselfish man would have

declined. Had he kept himself in cotton wool he would have lived to a great age, because he was sound to the core—physically and mentally. No other can take his place. It's an irreparable loss."

To this Pell added a few words :

"He was the kindest of men, Jess. And singularly free from the jealousies and vanities of his profession. He never grudged time or trouble in pushing forward talented youngsters. He was deeply interested in you, my dear."

"I know—I know."

Pell said slowly :

"He believed in Cherrington. His death affects poor Cherry more than any of us. The London contract was never signed. It won't be signed."

"Oh dear !"

"Lady Crewe can't carry on the theatre. She must sell the lease of it, or let it. Probably, with the present demand for theatres, she will let it at an immense rental. Her solicitors and friends will so advise her."

"What will Cherry do ?"

Pell shrugged his shoulders. "Cherrington, of course, must approach other managers, most of whom are knee-deep in engagements. Lady Crewe, so I understand from Pumford, is sole executrix. Pumford, for the present, will run this play in the provinces. He must. He has booked up a tour. It comes to this practically. If we make plenty of money, some fellow or other, or a syndicate, will put the show on in London, sooner or later. Naturally you don't realise what a tremendous gamble this London production is. A straw, one way or

another, may turn the scale. I am most awfully sorry for poor Cherry, but he's a young man and very clever. This is his first set-back."

Jess inferred from his tone that set-backs were to be expected by dramatists of whatever complexion, including the most sanguine and successful. What followed confirmed this, even if the statement had to be salted with the knowledge that the speaker was feeling sore and disappointed:

"You see, Jess, a play must be regarded as a marketable commodity, subject, as such, to the fluctuations of the market. From my point of view the market, at the moment, is bulling revue and musical comedy. The demand for legitimate stuff is decreasing. The theatres are getting into the wrong hands, into the hands of men who care nothing for the traditions of the stage, who are simply and brazenly 'on the make.' The pre-war playgoers and the more sophisticated profiteers are conspicuously absent from the theatre. I do a play and look at the stalls. I see hardly a soul I know. They are full of girls and boys who have a little money to burn. A change must come, but—when? Nobody can say. Now—what happens? Cherry goes to a manager or a syndicate with this play of ours . . ."

"Ours?"

A faint smile flickered about Pellie's prim mouth.

"I repeat—ours. Cherrington might resent that. Probably not. Because he isn't a thin-skinned fool. A play isn't a novel. It's as much the work and collective output of presenter, producer, company, and author as, let us say, a motor-car. The parts

are assembled. If bad stuff is put into a car it doesn't run properly. See?"

Jess nodded.

"Where was I? Oh, yes. Cherry takes our play to a manager. He reads him the play, no easy job to arrange, and shows him, perhaps, our provincial returns. So far, so good. The manager listens more or less patiently to the play, but he focuses attention on the returns. He has half a dozen similar propositions. He may have a leading man or lady tied up to him. He has to consider them. He may have paid out a lot of money on account to other authors. He has to consider them. First and last, he is asked to risk several thousand pounds. Other things being equal, he will take the goods that he thinks his public will want. He makes mistakes, naturally. The successful manager is the man who makes few mistakes, not the fellow who makes none. He doesn't exist. Now you have it in tabloid form."

Jess thanked him. The more she saw of the little man, the more she liked him, because of his common sense and enthusiasm. And he had his ideals to which he was loyal. He detested "bad stuff." He believed in the stage as an elevating influence in the commonwealth. He, too, like Sir Felix, kept an eye upon the rank and file, eager to help and encourage the strivers. He hunted talent as the Pells of Pell-Mannering had hunted foxes. The same ardour of the chase possessed him.

He continued, not so easily, with obvious constraint:

"I come to you, Jess. The unhappy death of Crewe doesn't affect you—much. Had he lived,

it is reasonably certain that you would have played 'Giggles' in the West End. That is very far from certain now. But you have made good. You will play 'Giggles' better and better. You will learn an immense lot from playing her, because there is no teacher like an appreciative audience. Managers will see you in the part. You will be offered more work. You are quite likely to be offered work in London. If so, Cherrington wouldn't stand in your way and block your advancement."

Jess said indignantly :

"You don't, you can't think that I would leave the cast before the tour was over?"

"As to that, I can only speak as your friend and adviser. You would be a fool if you didn't. Cherry himself would advise it. So would Pumford, another good friend of yours. What you would do or not do is beyond me. I don't pretend to understand women—never did. A young actress must jump at her chances. She doesn't get too many. London managers won't break a blood vessel rushing after you. Not yet, at any rate. It will be an interesting experiment putting you into quite a different part. All the same, your big chance will come. And it will come suddenly when you least expect it. When it comes, you must grip it, unless you are a fool."

Jess remained silent, sorry that she had displayed indignation, but disconcertingly perplexed, unable to analyse her own emotions and ambitions, conscious only that a clever man was forcing his convictions upon her. Being a true woman, she dissembled a little, saying, after a pause :

"What sort of part do you think I might be offered?"

He considered this gravely, drawing in his breath with an odd sibilant sound, as if he wished to fill his small lungs with as much fresh air as possible.

"Your big asset is your sincerity. How you get it over beats me! I remember a heated argument amongst all the stars in heaven long ago: *Is a great actor or actress master or mistress of his or her part?* I mean, could a superlative artist forget himself when playing? Coquelin, I think, maintained that he imposed his effects. Sarah, unless I have forgotten, confessed that she was swept away. It doesn't matter. The result is the same. I can't believe that you for instance, really know how you get there, do you?"

"I don't."

"Ah! Genius may or may not be the capacity for taking infinite pains, but it takes short cuts to its destination. I don't say yet that you have genius, but you have *something* uncommonly like it. And you are getting prettier every day. I never saw such a change in any girl. Well, my dear, if I were in management, I should try you out with Juliet. But where is Romeo? And the Swan of Avon seems to have flown into Germany. What part?" He wrinkled his brows. "The old comedies are shelved. And they exact so much technique. Lady Teazle is beyond you. No—your chance will come with a new play, just as it came with this. Somebody will write a part that needs freshness, artlessness, the very qualities that the highly-trained actress often loses. Cherry might do it."

He glanced at her keenly. She wondered whether

he knew that Cherry was attempting the task already. She was sworn to secrecy about his new play. But he might have talked it over with his friend. Then Pellie laughed.

"You can hold your tongue, Jess. It's all right. I happen to know what Cherry is at. And he has you in mind. But Cherry, so far as the profession is concerned, is to-day a rung or two below you."

"Pellie——!"

"Ask him."

"As if I should."

"Put it like this. There is a glut of plays, and a dearth of promising young actresses. I know at this moment of at least ten plays that can't be cast. Plays by men who have arrived. Heart-breaking for them, eh? The provinces are being combed out. Every manager hopes and believes that he will find in the country something that he can bring to town, without paying a prohibitive salary. I know their little ways. And I venture a prediction. Pummy will get a job with a rising actor going into management. And Pummy has ear-marked you. So—be nice to him."

Pumford, however, had left for London.

II

George remained in Manchester.

He had a few days' leave, and he fully intended to make the most of his opportunities. Miss Oldacre was right. *On revient!* No excuses need be offered for George. Admittedly, Miss Irene Seaton had made a fool of the hussar. He was dismally

conscious of this, and at the same time conscious, also, of an escape from bondage. As a prisoner he had not been well treated, cold fare had been his portion. Really, he had credited a charming, fascinating young actress with the qualities which she displayed on the stage. Once he had said to Jess: "Irene is so witty." But she was not witty off the stage. Indeed, George had found her inclined to be sleepy. She spent an afternoon, one Sunday, alone with him in a punt. George provided champagne and *foie-gras*. Irene did justice to these good creatures, but she slept soundly for two hours afterwards, and was inclined to be irritable when George awakened her from her slumbers. After nine performances in one week, who, the nymph asked, could resist the beguilements of Nature's sweet restorer?

And now she was engaged to a bounding mummer as unconscious of his bounds as a kangaroo!

He came back to his first love, and discovered her to be lovely. Not only lovely, but lovable. She had her little ways, the witch! She lured a fellow on, because she disdained ordinary lures. Her small hand rested passively in his; her eyes diffused softly the beams of friendship; her smile could convey derision. He tried to read her smile. Was she saying to herself: "Poor dear fellow, he left me for others"? And he had. That was the very deuce! At this moment Jess and he might have been married, happy as larks. The squire would have welcomed her. Mr. Yeo would have given away his daughter to the Second in Command of Sloden-Pauncefort with majestic satisfaction.

Why had he not trodden this smooth, rose-strewn path? Why, indeed?

He confided all this and more to the sympathetic ears of Miss Oldacre, in whom he recognised, intuitively, a friend and ally. Miss Oldacre had her weakness. She gloried in it. She was a match-maker, what the Bretons call *une marieuse*, although she received no commission. Everybody knew that in her wonderful youth she had sent away the fairy prince because she was in love with the stage. She would remain in love with it to the last. And to-day, she accepted mothers' parts, invested them, even in Whitechapel, with a glamour which rose, like a softly-tinted iridescent mist, out of maternal instincts denied expression.

Nan Oldacre had another weakness. She adored beauty in its Protean forms, but the beauty of Ma . ranked first. George reminded her poignantly of the fairy prince whom she had sent sorrowfully away. And George was a dasher. He had the air, the stride, the limbs, and the features of a conqueror. Ouida would have acclaimed him as a hero. Miss Oldacre remained faithful to Ouida and her famous rival, Miss Braddon. In a sense Nan envisaged life with the eyes of those romantic novelists.

You may be sure she encouraged George.

The young man made haste slowly, which was not his habit. But Jess knew. He was as easy to read as "Under Two Flags." And she was desperately sorry for him, which made her more beguiling. An experienced young woman must have played a part: hardening her face and sympathies. George would have fled from Manchester

disillusioned for ever had Jess been capable of dousing him with cold water. Her kindness misled him, warming him to great endeavour. He talked of his future in India.

"I shall go for big things, Jess. I mean to pass the higher standard and get on to the political side."

"Can you, George?"

When he talked in this Cambyes vein, she remembered his performance in the schoolroom at Sloden-Pauncefort, and his undaunted conviction that he would, despite this failure, be a welcome addition to the company. What a difference between him and Cherrington! The dramatist had raced away from examinations because he could pass them; the hussar, who could never spell accurately, raced at them. Life was certainly a perplexing problem.

"I feel," declared the fervent George, "that I can do anything, anything—with a touch of the spur from you."

Could Jess spur him on to disaster?

"Stick to the regiment. In time you'll be squire of Sloden-Pauncefort. You haven't to fight, as some have, for your bread and butter."

"I want more than that."

She turned aside her eyes, not in maidenly modesty as the infatuated George supposed. He whispered confidentially:

"I expect you know what I want."

"Do I? Don't we all want to live in our tiny air castles? And isn't it true that, fortunately perhaps, we don't? You wanted to live in a bungalow with Irene Seaton. You may live to thank God that she wanted something else."

"I'm well out of that. I never really loved her."

"You thought you did; you told me so."

"I tell you I want you."

Jess went on gently:

"Do any of us know, not what we want at a particular moment, but what is likely to satisfy us ten years hence?"

How could he guess that she was thinking of herself, not of him? He answered bluntly:

"The present is ours. Not the future. I pin my colours to the present. When I was in France I scrapped any temptation to worry about to-morrow."

"Then why do you talk of the political side in India?"

George flushed.

"Well, I talked of that because I thought it would interest you. If it doesn't I'm sorry."

She hastened to assure the rather huffed young man that she was interested both in his present and his future. To her relief, the too intimate talk was interrupted by Cherrington.

III

Outwardly, at any rate, Cherrington had accepted disappointment gallantly. And Jess perceived that he was genuinely grieved at the death of Crewe, speaking of him—as Miss Oldacre did—with affection and unqualified admiration. The potential lover is, perhaps, never so attractive to a woman as when he is revealing, unconsciously, the selfless side of his nature. Jess, indeed, had thought to herself:

"This is a great test. If he bewails his bad luck,

I shall turn from him. It may be detestable of me, but I dislike whiners." Because he didn't whine, she was so sympathetic that he wondered whether his patience could stand a racking strain.

We must admit, however, that our dramatist became jealous of the hussar, which indicates modesty up to a point. Looking at George, knowing what he could offer, knowing also that Jess was really fond of him, Cherrington felt unhappy about his own prospects. Miss Oldacre told Cherry that the maid was the complement of the man, and so forth. Cherrington was constrained to dissemble. He guessed that Nan Oldacre would not encourage him as a suitor. None the less, he hazarded a mild protest :

"Would you have her leave the stage? "

"Why not? All of us have assumed a certain responsibility in regard to little Jess. I don't dispute her cleverness as 'Giggles.' It's quite amazing. More so, perhaps, to me than to you. But her position is precarious. She is happy; she makes others happy; she distils happiness. *Bon!* I want her to remain happy. There are so few happy people."

"But this good chap, intellectually, is fathoms below her."

"True, Nature adjusts these discrepancies. Now you, Cherry, ought to marry rather a stupid wife."

"Thanks."

"I mean it. A clever wife is something of a bore to a clever man. Sooner or later there comes the clash of conflicting intelligences. You ought to take the ministering angel, who will subordinate

herself to you and your ambitions. For you are very ambitious, my dear friend."

"Frankly, I am."

"With your brains you ought to be. Pick the wee, crimson-tippit daisy girl."

"Are there any left?" asked Cherrington.

He attended Crewe's funeral, leaving the hussar in undisputed possession of the virgin field. After the funeral he saw Lady Crewe. Her solicitude for his disappointment touched him deeply. She was quite candid with him. The theatre would be let to the highest bidder; the provincial tour of his play would run its appointed course. Nothing else was possible. Cherrington thanked her and took his leave. Up to the last, he had hoped against hope that luck would not fail him. He admitted luck as a dominant factor in the career of a dramatist; and he believed in his own luck.

Before leaving London, he interviewed one of the leading managers, who was not an actor, and therefore more independent. Also, he was of the old-fashioned type, a lover of English comedy, and proud of the traditions of the famous playhouse which he owned and controlled. He received Cherrington courteously and gave him an excellent cigar, listening attentively to what the young man said. He was quite aware of the Manchester success.

"I wish you could see my play, Mr. Orford."

Orford pursed a dubious lip. Plays came to him; he was happily relieved of the necessity of going to plays. He would read the script with pleasure. But he concluded:

"We have a winner here. It may run till next Christmas. I am pledged to produce its successor, and after that my plans are very uncertain. I dare not look too far ahead."

"Gossip has it, Mr. Orford, that you are looking as far as New York."

"I have no prejudice against American plays, or any plays. Send me your script. Who knows——?"

Cherrington took up his hat and gloves.

"One moment, Mr. Cherrington. I told you I didn't go often to plays. *Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!* But I have my runners, who report faithfully. Do you happen to know of any promising young actress? I am looking for somebody who does not advertise in Thursday's *D.T.* I want a young, pretty, intelligent girl, indisputably a lady."

Cherrington remained silent, ravaged by his thoughts. Orford apparently wanted just such a girl as Jess. It was known to everybody in the profession that Orford had his scouts—active, alert fellows who scurried through the provinces. Sorely was Cherrington tempted to hold his tongue.

"Wanted an unknown paragon! For what sort of part?"

"Can I rely upon your discretion?"

"You can."

Orford looked keenly at him; the scrutiny was satisfactory.

"What I am telling you is absolutely confidential. I am losing one of my actresses. She is going out of the cast, marrying, leaving the stage altogether. No irreparable loss. She has not made good here, too many tricks. Musical comedy and revue have

ruined her. She is horribly self-conscious. Between ourselves, I am glad to get rid of her. The part in question is an important part. It exacts an artlessness that is difficult to find, a sort of sanctified simplicity most engaging if it can be conveyed without taint of artificiality."

"I understand."

"I dare not risk failure. If I get the right sort from the provinces she must rehearse the part on approval. I insist on that."

"When would you want her?"

"After Easter."

Cherrington said with hesitation:

"I do know of somebody who might suit, but she happens to be playing in my comedy. I—I couldn't burke such a chance as this."

Orford smiled benignantly.

"You are very generous. If I may say so, this theatre is and always has been the nursery of talent. Your protégée would be in safe keeping. And if she made good, there is a part for her in my next play. Humanly speaking, her future as an actress would be assured."

"I don't doubt that."

Cherrington went away, after promising to write from Manchester. He had intended to dine at The Buskin, to cheer himself up with good fellowship and good fare. Instead, he dined alone at a small restaurant, hardly able to eat. Jess obsessed him. Her wonderful good luck captivated his lively imagination. Unable to eat with any enjoyment, he ordered coffee and a big cigar. He puffed at his cigar, thinking hard. Suddenly, with irrelevance,

he remembered his bet with Pellie. The bet had been about this very play at Orford's theatre. And the six weeks were up! He would get a tenner out of the old boy, and the satisfaction of knowing that he had predicted aright—Orford had a winner! A winner! What did it feel like to have a winner at Orford's theatre? Oddly enough, he couldn't recall the actress who had not made good. He must see the play again—at once. He paid his bill and hurried to the theatre. Yes, all the boards were out. *Stalls full—Dress Circle full—Upper boxes full—Pit and Gallery.* Wait—the boxes were not full. If Orford, which was extremely unlikely, happened to be in the theatre, he would give him a box. In a moment he learned that Orford was dining at his club. The clerk at the box-office was slightly known to Cherry, who explained what he wanted without compromising Orford. The clerk, a good fellow, had a word with the business manager. Just before the curtain went up Cherry found himself in a box, staring at the programme, a-quiver with excitement. At last! This was the part which was offered to Jess "on appro." A fine part, a part that carried with it a capital salary. And Orford was no pincher.

Throughout the comedy, he concentrated attention on the actress who was going out of the cast. Within five minutes he knew as surely as mortal man can know anything in this world, that Jess could play the part. Before the final curtain fell, he was just as certain that she would triumph in it with proper coaching. Orford was right, absolutely right. The actress now playing had all the

tricks, stereotyped tricks, that find favour with musical comedy audiences. She cast languishing glances at youths in the stalls, peacocked about the stage, grimaced, assumed absurd postures. And sweet simplicity was wanted, the very quality that distinguished Jess on or off the stage. What an opportunity!

Thoughts of self had vanished. His desire to serve the woman he loved became inordinate as the minutes passed. Nan Oldacre would study the part with Jess, a labour of love assuredly; Pellie would help with enthusiasm; before she presented herself to Orford she would have become, with her confounding aptitudes, the real right thing.

Yes; the affair was cut and dried.

He returned to his flat in West Kensington, lit a pipe, and flung himself into a big armchair, alive and alert to his finger tips and toes.

And then the cruel reaction set in.

Jess would go out of his cast; she would soar high above him.

He glanced at the familiar room. He had furnished it bit by bit, with ever-increasing satisfaction. There were many books, a few good prints, a piano, and his Chippendale bureau and chairs. A certain austerity informed the room. The walls were a cool, soft grey, a fine background for the mahogany. The carpet, also, was grey. And the sofa and armchairs were upholstered in black with grey peacocks upon them.

He eyed the general effect critically. What was wanted? A woman's touch. He could imagine what Jess would add—a brilliant cushion or two, flowers, porcelain . . .

If Jess were here . . .

He tried to visualise their life as husband and wife, the happy partnership, each working hard for a common end, a triumphant achievement.

This flat which had sufficed him for several years would be empty for evermore unless it held Jess. Would she come? Would his patience supremely rewarded?

An evil thought assailed him, gripped him with a stranglehold. Jess was ambitious. If he played skilfully upon her ambitions, if he used this wonderful opportunity to win her, she might be his. Expediency seemed to justify what he contemplated. Through Jess, if she triumphed, he would rise to heights. She would play in his plays.

He poured himself out a whisky-and-soda, and refilled his pipe, but now he was unable to sit down. He paced the small room, thinking hard, frowning and smiling alternately, reconstructing his plans with the ingenuity of a Machiavelli. His brain worked admirably and with astonishing detachment. How often he had paced this room working out some imaginary problem, creating the characters in a play, beholding them burst into life. He could remember killing a woman in fancy upon his own sofa. Killing a woman!

He stood still. The sense of aloofness abandoned him, his schemes slowly crumbled into dust. If he won Jess unfairly, would he kill her? What did she really want?

He began again, gropingly, picking his way through shadowy alleys, the *vias tenebrosas* of life. He was not what orthodox churchmen term a man

of fixed principles, inasmuch as he held that nothing was absolutely fixed except death. His ideas, for example, concerning Right and Wrong, were in a state of flux. Right, in fine, lay far apart from Wrong—he admitted that—but between them stretched a No Man's Land, the debatable strip where hapless mortals wandered hither and thither like sheep in a fog, herding together instinctively. He thought: "I am alone: the fog; I have lost the flock."

He felt horribly alone.

Presently he opened the window, and leaned out of it, inhaling the cold night air, gazing vacantly at lights twinkling out of the mirk. Darkness and light. One couldn't conceive of one without the other. Lighted windows indicated companionship; dark spaces suggested solitude. He shivered and closed the window, drawing the curtains.

Glancing at his watch, he decided that Jess must be in bed. Was she lying awake thinking of him or Apperton? Would this mind-distracting possibility of work in London wean her thoughts from the hussar? Another lever to achieve his ends.

With a brain dulled and fagged by intense concentration, he became conscious of physical fatigue and an odd craving for food. He always breakfasted at his flat. There was something, not much, in his larder—bacon, eggs, bread and butter. He fried some bacon in a chafing dish, and ate it with appetite. And he reflected, with grim humour, that most people were hungry after a funeral.

Fortified by the bacon, he piled coal upon his fire, and sat down again. The pea-soup fog had lifted.

He realised that he had wandered back to the Light, a synonym for Right. Jess must be offered her great chance quite simply, without conditions imposed or suggested. Nothing else was possible for him.

A small clock upon the mantelpiece struck two solemn notes.

He went to bed and slept soundly.

IV

Upon the eve of return to his regiment, George proposed—dashingly. He had considered the propriety of doing this by letter from Canterbury. But he reflected wisely that his spelling might provoke laughter. At the same time he was uncomfortably sensible that a man, if he counts himself a player of Cupid's game, cannot change partners quite as swiftly as at bridge. Probably he would have bided his time, but Jess, in a new frock, overpowered prudence. Miss Oldacre had assisted in the choice of this frock, and none knew better than she the value of appearances. Her taste in such matters was consummate. Part of her income was now derived from managers, like Orford, who appointed her Mistress of the Robes at important productions. We may surmise that she wanted to see how Jess would look at her best, and not in the rags of "Giggles." The result justified and surpassed expectation.

When George beheld Jess in her new frock, he blinked.

"How the little filly has come on," he thought. He was taking her out to luncheon, and by the

ill-luck of things (so far as he was concerned) Jess selected the restaurant where she had lunched with Cherrington. They actually sat at the same table.

George ordered a *déjeuner soigné*.

Solemnly, he invited Jess to drink champagne. She drank ginger beer !

" I shall have a pint of bubbly," said George.

How could she help contrasting him with her dramatist ? George, at first, talked volubly about himself, but he came to the conclusion that this topic of conversation no longer interested Jess as of yore. Fortified by the " bubbly," he began to throw bouquets at Jess.

" You've furnished up. The change in you is a knock-out. And, I'm not only thinking of that frock, but what's inside it. Hat's all right, too, but your little head is what interests me. I wish your people and mine—and mine—could see you."

" They will," said Jess smiling demurely.

" As an old friend," continued George very confidentially, " 'd like to give you a tip or two."

" That's very generous of you."

" Not a bit. Lookers on, as you know, see most of the game."

" Yes ; I've been told so before."

" You ought to chuck all this."

" Why ? "

George's methods were invariably intuitional. To assign reasons for his intuitions distressed him. Nevertheless, he tackled the question solemnly.

" You're too *fine* for the stage. I know. I've been there. God bless you, it would do me a power of good if such a little dear could profit by my

unhappy experiences. What is the stage? What is it, I ask you?"

Jess replied as solemnly:

"It's a profession, George."

"Not much. It's an imitation of a profession, not a Simon Pure article. It's—it's a land of shams."

George was so pleased with this effort that he summoned the wine waiter and ordered an old brandy with his coffee which cost him four shillings. He had not yet finished his *sole normande*, but a soldier looks ahead. When the waiter retired, visibly impressed, Jess repeated his words softly:

"A land of shams, is it?"

"Just that."

"But, George, dear, I want to speak as seriously as you do. Isn't Sloden-Pauncefort a land of shams?"

George laid down his knife and fork. If we pause to consider him as a valiant trencherman, this has significance.

"Sloden-Pauncefort——?"

She nodded solemnly. She was not dissembling. George had submitted a problem, a nut to be cracked.

"Yes. At any rate it seems so to me. But, of course, I haven't your wonderful experience as a man of the world."

"Of course you haven't, thank the Lord! But, go on. Explain yourself. Personally, I look upon the dear old village as a bit of God's country."

"I am speaking of the villagers, not of the village."

George tackled his sole again, almost viciously.

"The villagers? Do you include your father and mine?"

"Well, yes."

"You say my dear old daddy is a sham?"

"He has to be."

"You astonish me, Jess; you do indeed."

He looked astonished. His pleasant face was wrinkled by interrogation and perplexity, the more so because he grasped the essential fact that Jess was not joking; she meant what she said.

"Do I? Often I astonish myself. You see, George, at Sloden-Pauncefort I have had time to think things out. Perhaps the great difference between us is just this: that you take all these things for granted. So does your father; so does mine. Why I shouldn't walk in your ways, as my people do, bothers me, but there it is. Shall we leave out personalities? I don't want to say anything disagreeable about your father or mine. What I feel applies to all of us, more or less. The Duke of Sloden told me that everybody at the Castle, including himself, had to play a part. He is constantly doing and saying what is not quite natural to him. At Sloden-Pauncefort the villagers, gentle and simple, are always acting. We call upon some of our neighbours and hope we shall find them out, or 'not at home.' We go to church whether we want to go or not. I was made to spend thousands of hours practising the piano although I have no turn for it. We girls are trained to suppress our feelings, to make a 'visiting face,' to pretend not to see what is under our noses. Mother calls it

'keeping the blinds down.' I have not been a dutiful daughter about that. I peeped. Sometimes I am inclined to thank mother for any success I have had here. She trained me to act. And so, George, if it is true that the stage is a land of shams, I see it as part of a world of shams."

She laughed gaily.

George's mouth and heart were too full for speech. Jess appeared to him kaleidoscopic. Dimly he apprehended the futility of further argument. And, being a man of action, he thought to himself: "I must get her out of this; she doesn't know where she is, bless her! She doesn't know that she's riding for a fall, riding with a loose rein, straight for a pit." Accordingly, he nodded and said with conviction:

"This is a good sole."

Jess replied, showing a dimple:

"And so are you."

After luncheon, George wondered where they could go. Rain prevented a brisk walk. But there must be some blessed place, a museum, for instance, a sanctuary for two pals who wanted to spend a couple of hours together.

Cherry had taken Jess to a picture gallery. She did not mention this to George, but it occurred to her that it might be amusing and profitable to test George as she had tested Cherry. Within a few minutes they found themselves opposite the very landscape that had provoked from the dramatist a dissertation on vibrations.

"What do you think of that?" asked Jess.

George cocked his handsome head. He was quite

prepared to deal with pictures faithfully, as he dealt with horses. Of everything connected with the art of painting he was profoundly ignorant, but that made no difference to our hussar. A fellow knew whether he liked a thing. Fortified by this conviction, and warmed by the old brandy, George stigmatised the canvas in front of him as "rotten."

"Rotten?"

"What does it mean? I want a picture with a story to it. Are those fluffy smudges sheep? I could make a better stagger at painting a sheep myself."

"Perhaps the artist didn't want us to look at the sheep. He is trying, I think, to get atmosphere. Sheep seen through a mist do look like fluffy smudges."

George wandered on. He waxed enthusiastic when he discovered a horse with good bone.

"Now, Jess, this chap knows his job. Half the fellows who paint horses have never been on a horse. That horse measures a good nine inches below the knee—up to fifteen stone, which he ought to be with that heavy weight on his back. But where did the man buy his boots? And that saddle was never made in London."

Jess assented. This was expert criticism and amusing in its way. Presently, George found a comfortable velvet-covered couch upon which they seated themselves. The rain could be heard pattering down upon the skylight above them; the room, at the moment, held no other visitors.

"Pictures bore me," observed George. "I cotton to live things. I'd sooner look at a Morland than

a Turner. In a sense I don't know that an up-to-date pigsty doesn't interest me more than a cathedral."

"I love to hear you say so," said Jess.

And she did. George's interest in simple things delighted her, appealing strongly to what was simple in her. She remembered what Cherry had said about the lure of the Wild. In the wilderness, George would be the better man, more resourceful and practical. She tried to see George and herself alone upon some coral islet of the Pacific—Adam and Eve in a primitive paradise. A sigh escaped her.

"Why do you sigh, Jess?"

"I was thinking of the unattainable."

"Why bother with that?"

He edged closer. The sigh, somehow, captivated him, the plaintive note of weakness. George liked to think of women, collectively, as soft and sweetly dependent upon the male. He continued, dropping his voice:

"You aren't unhappy, are you?"

"Oh, no."

"Have your people been nasty?"

"No. They are marking time about me, wondering which way I shall jump, up or down."

"Well, I'm thinking of that, too. When you cut loose, I cheered. I told 'em that the war had changed you girls. I know all about that. I said: 'Give her her head!' It was plucky of you to bolt. Bless your innocent heart, I understand you."

"How wonderful of you, George!"

"Not at all. Live and learn! But, now, you've had your little fling, and you're all the better for it. I admit that."

"Thanks."

"And I've had mine. A fellow in the regiment said a smart thing to me the other day. I'd asked him why he weighed in at a simply putrid play full of beastliness, written, of course, by a foreigner. 'I went to it,' said he, 'to make sure that I should never go to such a show again.' Very sound that. It applies to me. I ran after Irene, and took a nasty toss. But I'm grateful to Irene. Now, I know what to look for."

Jess said hastily :

"How hard it's raining !"

"Let it rain—outside. We're pretty snug, eh ?"

"Ye—es."

"Just you and me. Jess, dear," his voice shook a little, "I cottoned to you when your hair was down your back. You gave me a curl. You cottoned to me. You—you nestled up, you darling. We were kids, but it was the right thing. I've behaved like an idiot, like a swine. I ought to have stuck to you tight as wax. Instead, I played about with half a dozen girls not fit to black your shoes. It's something—isn't it ?—to have found that out. Now, I come back to you. I think of you night and day. I want you more than ever. Perhaps I'm rushing you. I can't help it. I'm off to-morrow. I must know where I stand. Where do I stand, Jess ?"

He seized her hand, pressing it, but it lay gloved and passive in his ardent clasp. Almost was she swept off her feet. With George as dominant partner her future shone rosy and serene. Everybody would be pleased. She would return to Sloden-Pauncefort trailing clouds of glory. She

asked herself if she was capable of feeling passion for any man? How many pure maids have asked themselves this question? How many can answer it? Juliet had not been in doubt. But she had met so few Juliets. In her heart she desired to adore her future husband. Long ago, she had decided that love must be the supreme beatitude of life to a woman. But Love, the overmastering, overwhelming god, omnipotent, seemed to have passed her by. Thrills, the quivering, vibrating pangs, had come to her on the stage, when she stood alone facing the glare of the footlights and the blare of a big audience. If Cherry or George could move her like that——! Young wives had whispered to her that these intoxicating emotions were aroused after marriage. . . . She stood, like Diana, surveying her lovers with chill aloofness.

None the less, George moved her maternally. And he was not likely to change much. He would remain, till the end, ingenuously boyish, candid, brave, and loyal. He would step into his father's shoes, and look exactly like him.

"Where do I stand?" he repeated softly.

"Where do I stand?" echoed Jess in a troubled voice. "Perhaps I am different from other girls, more self-centred, I mean. You tempt me, George, you do indeed, because we are such good friends, because really I know you better than any other man. But I don't love you in the right way. It would be splendid if I did. I wish that I could. But I don't."

George said humbly:

"That's all right, Jess. I'm an ass. I've rushed

at this. I can imagine that a girl like you hesitates before she takes a man like me. I'm a bit shop-soiled, and you're fresh as dew."

The dew gathered in her eyes as he spoke. Two drops trickled down her cheeks. Had he taken her in his arms and kissed them away, the ice about her heart might have melted. Her tears were not shed altogether for him. She knew that she was sorry for herself. Two good men and true wanted her. She believed that she might be happy with either. It was almost impossible to discriminate between them, although each was in many ways the antithesis of the other.

George stood up.

"I have made you cry, Jess. I could sit down and howl myself. Now, look here, I shall take you back to the hotel, pack my traps, and leave to-night. We shan't go to India for six months at least. Much may happen in that time. I can't take this as final. Cheer up!"

Jess said nothing.

V

She went early to the theatre that night, to escape from Miss Oldacre's questions, and found Florrie alone in the dressing-room, staring sentimentally at Harry's photograph.

"He has proposed," said Florrie.

For a moment Jess thought that Florrie was alluding to George.

"By letter," added Florrie, "I'd like to show it to you."

"But—would he like me to see it?"

Florrie was quite sure that Harry wouldn't mind. The letter, presumably, had been copied from a work entitled : "Courtship and Matrimony." Jess, after perusing the billet, came to this conclusion because, long ago, she had bought the book at a railway bookstall, and it had beguiled refreshingly a long journey.

"I didn't know," said Florrie, "that Harry could write such a beautiful letter."

"Have you answered it?" asked Jess, as she returned the billet.

"It only came to-night. I'm fair up the pole, dear. I can't say 'yes' and I won't say 'No.' Marrying would mean leaving the stage. Now, I ask you, am I going to leave the stage after my notices? Not likely. But I'm glad Harry proposed. It does show appreciation, doesn't it? He's the tenth this year. And I haven't said 'no' to any of 'em."

Jess wondered whether Florrie and she were "sisters under their skins." Was Florrie cold? She did not exactly convey that impression. By this time, Jess knew all about Harry. He was an electrician on his own, a sober, hard-working, steady fellow.

"Have you ever been in love, Florrie?"

"Me? I'm always hopping in and out of love. Began when I was twelve. Never been without a boy since. But there, really and truly, between you and me, the trouble with me is that I think too much of a girl—myself! I love myself better than any boy."

This was illuminating. Florrie continued airily, as she began her make-up :

"I mean to get there on me own. Any fool of a girl can marry and settle down to dull times. Matrimony is dull. You can't get away from that. Muds says so. None for me—yet. I'll bet you feel just the same."

Truly, the perspicacity of the little baggage was disconcerting. The belated entrance of Muds, bearing with her a whiff of sherry, cut short a promising duologue.

That night Jess played badly. She knew it; and the company knew it. Florrie, after the last act, said with brutal frankness:

"Lucky for you Mr. Cherrington wasn't in front. He may be sweet on you, but your performance was the limit. I counted the laughs you lost. So did The Owl. You'll hear from him. Anything wrong?"

"Nothing."

"That's what we all say when our little hearts are breaking."

Jess shared a taxi with Miss Oldacre back to the hotel, where supper for two only was awaiting them. Pellie had said farewell to Manchester with many regrets, but he was producing another play elsewhere. As soon as they were alone in the taxi Jess said to Miss Oldacre:

"I played vilely to-night."

The sagacious lady laughed, pressing the arm close to hers.

"Perhaps you have something to tell me."

"Yes, but not now."

"Certainly not. I was never in a taxi with a more unromantic smell about it. You must tell your tale after supper."

Jess wondered if George possessed histrionic powers—hitherto undiscovered. Obviously, Miss Oldacre believed that the hussar was returning to Canterbury a happy man, leaving behind him a love-sick girl unable to get her laughs. George had taken leave of Miss Oldacre before the performance, presenting a black silk bag, mounted in tortoiseshell, with a cipher in gold. Miss Oldacre was charmed alike with the gift and the words that followed.

"The bag isn't empty," said George. "It is bursting with my thanks and good wishes."

"*Le beau sabreur*," commented the lady.

"Your playing never varies," said Jess.

"Oh, doesn't it? I can't play when I'm out of temper with myself. No woman can. To give our best, we must feel our best. Your success here is largely due to the fact that you're such a happy little creature."

"But 'Giggles' isn't happy."

"You don't quite understand me. With a mind at ease, an actress can concentrate upon her part, give it undivided attention. Cultivate the easy mind."

"Can it be cultivated?"

"Certainly. Provided you have a good digestion. The easy mind is unattainable with an uneasy stomach."

At the hotel, a surprise was in store for them. As they entered the parlour, they saw Cherrington with a beaming face mixing a salad.

CHAPTER VI

MR. YEO TAKES THE FIELD

I

BEFORE Cherrington left London, he had another interview with Orford. That great man received him graciously, but Cherry was given to understand, very courteously, that he was welcome to a box at Mr. Orford's theatre, if a box happened to be unsold, but not so welcome in Mr. Orford's private room, unless he had something of importance to say. Upon this second visit he was not, at first, offered a cigar. And a chair was indicated with a wave of the hand which invited the visitor to sit down for a minute or two, not longer.

Cherry sat down, glancing at an immense pile of plays, probably unread. Then he said briskly:

"What do you think of Miss Oldacre?"

"I haven't time to tell you," replied Orford.

"Miss Oldacre is a long and delightful chapter in the History of the British Drama."

"She is playing in my comedy at Manchester."

Orford ought to have known this, but he didn't. He expressed mild surprise:

"Really? I congratulate you."

Quickly and concisely, Cherry explained why he had asked for this second interview. He had spent



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an evening studying the actress who was going out of the cast at Mr. Orford's theatre. The sooner she went the better in the interests of all concerned.

"That is my opinion, Mr. Cherrington."

"The young lady playing in my comedy is all that the other is not. I am convinced that she will more than satisfy you."

"But you must allow me to be the judge of that."

Cherrington played his ace of trumps.

"I hate the idea of losing Miss Jessica Yeo. That is her name. I feel towards her as Columbus felt when he discovered America. She is immense. Miss Oldacre thinks so. Sir Felix Crewe shared that opinion."

"Their opinion impresses and interests me."

"If Miss Oldacre coached her for this part, and if Miss Oldacre guaranteed to you that she could play it adequately, would you waive this stipulation about rehearsing on approval?"

"Will you smoke a cigar, Mr. Cherrington?"

"With pleasure."

The selection and lighting of a cigar took time. When the cigar was drawing nicely, Mr. Orford delivered his ultimatum:

"If Miss Oldacre is kind enough to coach Miss Yeo, and if she gives me her positive assurance that the part will be adequately played, I will engage Miss Yeo. No manager in London can shrink more than I do from this rehearsing on approval. To tell a pretty, enthusiastic girl that she is not good enough for this theatre is simply heart-rending."

"Do you tell her, Mr. Orford?"

"Never—if I can avoid it."

Orford laughed, leaning back in his comfortable chair, eyeing Cherry with a twinkle in his eye, thinking to himself: "This is a sharp young fellow, who doesn't entirely consider his own interests." He continued seriously: "This theatre, with its traditions, is a great responsibility; and I am no longer young. I guard our traditions jealously."

Cherrington nodded. He regarded Orford as one of the Old Guard, but by no means negligible on that account. It was said of him, by the more cynical spirits at The Buskin, that he concerned himself with nothing outside his famous theatre. This might be true or not. Certainly results justified Orford's undivided attention to his own affairs. He inspired devotion, as Crewe had done, in those who worked for and under him. And his position was almost unassailable. The best came to him, as he had said. Before the war he could fill his stalls with his own pet public. Burke's Landed Gentry accepted gratefully the comedies that Mr. Orford presented. Young daughters could take their mothers to these comedies knowing nothing whatever about them except the salient fact that no line would offend or infect the maternal mind. Problem plays, risky adaptations from Palais Royal farces, melodrama, were taboo.

"What is this Manchester comedy about, Mr. Cherrington? You may think I ought to know. I don't. Look!"

He indicated the pile of plays on a table.

"Surely you have a reader, Mr. Orford?"

"I trust no judgment except my own. I have

a 'nose' for what is wanted here. I am aware, of course, that you have had a success."

Thus encouraged, Cherry presented a synopsis of his play. Orford lay back in his chair, half closing his eyes, pursing his lips, nodding his head like a mandarin. When the young man finished, he said kindly:

"A well-spiced dish to set before Manchester. I shall be entirely frank with you."

"Please."

"Coster plays are not to my taste. I seek distinction, quality, polish. Naturally, one doesn't find that in the Mile End Road. A good, clean story—humorously told. That is the desideratum. But let me see your script."

Cherry went his way enjoying the great man's excellent cigar, and assimilating his words of wisdom. A good, clean story, humorously told. That description might apply fairly to the play upon which he was working, the play built for and around Jess. If Jess captured Orford, he would read a play that exploited her with interest sharply whetted.

He told himself that he liked Orford, because he appeared to be straight. And a gentleman of taste. Good taste, as Mrs. Grundy interprets that elusive expression, was the dominant note of Orford's theatre. It struck Cherrington, however, that Orford had paid in full the bill of penalties which success in the theatrical world imposes ruthlessly. He sat aloof from everything and everybody outside his theatre. What a singular obsession the stage was! It obsessed all from the presenter of plays,

who paid the piper, down to the call-boy. The image of life became a greater thing than life itself. Orford was a bachelor. He lived in his comfortable room at the theatre. He might have subsidiary interests—he had spoken of his garden in the country—but they were regarded as subsidiary. He was rich ; he could retire ; but he couldn't and wouldn't retire.

" Am I like that ? " asked Cherrington.

He tried to answer the question honestly, recognising a dual personality in himself, two Cherringtons at civil war with each other. One was head over heels in love with a young woman ; the other was in love with his profession. Till he met Jess, his profession had ranked first. It might rank first again. He thought, not too happily, of his relations with his family, relations strained from the moment when he had cut leading strings. Had he followed their ambitions instead of his own he would have been to-day in possession of a " fixed income." To his father and mother a fixed income was on all fours with fixed principles. Perhaps he ought to have kept more in touch with The Laurels. What a name ! How could any self-respecting young man keep in touch with that evergreen sanctuary of platitudes and conventions ? A laurel hedge, trimly clipped, encompassed a house, built by an architect who believed in and deserved eternal punishment. And the people inhabiting such houses became exactly like them—stucco ! Of course there was the river, the silvery Thames, flowing to the sea, to the ocean. Looking back, he could remember, as a boy, that the river had swept

him out of Surbiton. In his canoe he had floated enchantingly out of a prosaic present of ever-recurring examinations into the rosy future of Bohemia. Never had he regretted cutting the painter. And then the war, with its horrors and sufferings, lying behind him, thank God, like a dreadful nightmare! He had never dared to think much about the war. Perhaps it had taught him to enjoy, to make the most of, the passing moment. . . .

No, as yet, he was not like Orford.

II

He carried back with him to Manchester a prompt copy of the play at Orford's theatre, and the particular part to be studied by Jess. The copy of the play was to be delivered to Miss Oldacre. Cherry read it through in the train, telling himself that he had something to learn from the well-known dramatist who had written it, possibly with his tongue in his cheek. He wondered whether Orford had commissioned it, because it was a good story, humorously told, cunningly constructed, cumulative in interest, what Orford called "sound stuff." Cherrington knew the dramatist, a popular member of The Buskin. He was essentially a man of formulæ, something of a "play doctor." Unlike Orford, he went to every show in London taking note of what pleased the public, keeping his finger upon the pulse of different audiences, sticking his clinical thermometer into every mouth. He could write revue, do a lyric for a musical comedy, interpolate a blood-and-thunder scene in a melodrama. At

The Buskin, over a decanter of port, he would wax cynical at the expense of the "highbrows," who pursued shadows. It was easy to guess why Pellie had lost his tenner. The *première* of the comedy had been acclaimed by the first-nighters, but, from what Orford had hinted, the box-office returns for the opening fortnight were disappointing. Immediately the author had gone to work, cutting and slashing scenes that languished, adding "fat," and "punch"—squeezing the lemon till every drop of juice was extracted. He had turned a loser into a winner by sheer determination and ability. With a public that demanded entertainment there was no other way. To withdraw from the world, as Ibsen had done when he wrote "Brand," to evolve from oneself, regardless of all others, something original which might be hailed by critics as a masterpiece, meant courting failure. "Brand," of course, was never intended for the stage. It achieved fame as a poem. Given as a play in Copenhagen it lasted from 6.30 to 1.15! Could one imagine an English audience sitting patiently through a seven-hour performance?

Having read the play, Cherrington dismissed it from his mind, and lay back thinking of Jess. He had decided that Jess must be pushed on and up regardless of his own interests. In an odd fashion he had regarded this as a sort of self-inflicted penance. His conscience pricked him, whenever he thought of his own people. In a sense he had neglected them. But such neglect had been inevitable. His mother had suggested that he might work at home. Could he work under such banal conditions? No.

Whenever he appeared in the family circle, it seemed to tighten round him, strangling imagination. Now he was regarded as an outsider. If he spent a week-end at The Laurels, he was asked, as a *quid pro quo* for very indifferent food and wine, to send tickets for a play. Sometimes he paid for them with a humorous satisfaction. However, the fact bristled and became a hair shirt; he was too self-centred. To serve Jess, to gild her fortunes, enticed him delightfully, producing a sort of glow. And to achieve this end, to satisfy an uneasy conscience, he must scrap self.

And this, perhaps, accounted for the beaming smile with which he greeted the ladies upon their return from the theatre.

III

Jess, certainly, was unaffectedly glad to see her author. His unexpected presence postponed the telling of a tale that might provoke frowns and disapprobation. During supper Cherrington talked of London and the theatrical slump. He mentioned, incidentally, that Orford's theatre was packed. Miss Oldacre commented upon this, as Cherrington indeed had hoped she would.

"It's the best theatre in London, and run admirably. Harry Orford knows his business. I am not sorry to hear of this slump. It means, I suppose, that the boys have not so much money in their pockets, and the Americans are going home. Perhaps we may now expect less saccharine fare. Did you see Lady Crewe?"

Cherrington repeated what Lady Crewe had said. Both Jess and Miss Oldacre were much impressed by his good temper under disappointment.

"Somebody else will do your play," said the optimistic Nan.

"I don't think so. Orford will read it, but he is up to his neck in scripts, and pledged to the production after this. He doesn't cotton to coster plays. He expects to get back his pre-war audiences. However, one of my sketches is going on at the Coliseum."

They went on talking shop till Jess felt sleepy and so, glad of an excuse to escape from a parlour that might become at any moment a confessional box. When the door closed behind her, Cherrington asked his hostess if she were tired, in a tone that excited curiosity.

"You have something to tell me?"

"Well, yes, something jolly and exciting."

Defrauded of one tale, Miss Oldacre listened sympathetically to another. When Cherrington finished, she stared at him intently.

"You are a remarkable young man," she observed.

"Am I?"

"You propose to let Jess leave the cast, where she is badly wanted."

"We can find somebody else."

"Not another Jess. However, that is your affair and Pummy's. Pummy will kick."

"I can handle Pummy."

"What luck this child has . . . ! I suspend judgment till I've read the play. I'll help, if I can."

"I knew you'd say that, bless you!"

"It's a chance in ten thousand. But you," her placid brows wrinkled, "I can't understand you, unless——" she laughed.

"Unless——?"

"It has just occurred to me that this wonderful friendship for Jess may be something else. Perhaps you are plotting and scheming to get her to London where she will be near you."

Cherry smiled blandly. He had no intention of making a confidante of Miss Oldacre. He said easily:

"I am thinking of letting my small flat, and retiring for a few months to Chagford. On Dartmoor I may get what I want in my new play—atmosphere, freshness. I can assure you of this: I am leaving myself out of the programme. I am thinking of and for Jess."

"Where is the prompt copy?"

"In my room."

"Please get it."

When he returned to the parlour, Miss Oldacre was in her favourite dressing-gown, not the gorgeous rose-brocade. Evidently she had prepared herself for action. Her eyes were sparkling with anticipation. She looked younger, prettier. Cherrington perceived that she was prepared to renew her youth which she still preserved because she could live again in others, bathe in their enthusiasms, and emerge from such cleansing waters revived and purged of the accretions of age.

"I saw the play in London. I can remember it as a whole. Read me the scenes where Jess would appear."

Cherry obeyed. He could read well, so well that a manager once told him that he read too well; critical judgment was disarmed by his clear, pleasant voice. When he finished, Miss Oldacre rose from her chair, went to a sideboard, and took from it a pint of champagne.

"Open it."

He did so, filling two glasses. Miss Oldacre held up her glass.

"To Jess."

Solemnly they drank the toast. Cherry flung his empty glass into the fire-place. Miss Oldacre did the same with a gay laugh.

"What children we are!"

They lit cigarettes and talked. Miss Oldacre had no doubts whatever. Jess would triumph. It would be a joy to coach her in such a part, the same sort of part exactly in which the speaker had triumphed long ago. Picking up the script, the great actress spoke a few lines. Cherrington was too young to remember her when she bewitched the world. But he could understand why the old boys at The Buskin hailed her as incomparable. The sweetness and grace of her flouted time.

"I should like to kneel down and kiss your shoes."

He kissed her hand instead.

IV

So far, so good. These two stout friends took for granted that Jess would hug opportunity. To their undisguised dismay the young lady exhibited obstinacy, the obstinacy that had not served her

father too well as Commissioner of Burrahbugpore. Miss Oldacre presented the proposition after breakfast, next day. She was so brimful of it, that she forgot George altogether, till Jess reminded her of the hussar by saying nothing about him. A nimble brain leaped to the conclusion that Jess disdained this astounding offer because George had offered something even more alluring.

"I quite understand," said Miss Oldacre. "You are going East not West."

"I beg your pardon?"

"To India."

Whereupon the tale was told. And it lost something in the telling, being served up cold instead of warm. Miss Oldacre nodded, pressing the maid's hand, puzzled and disappointed, but still hopeful.

"I like him so much, Jess."

"So do I. I wish they would leave me alone."

"They?"

"This is not my first. I can't compete with Florrie—ten in one year! And I haven't encouraged one, not one. You believe that?"

"Yes, yes; but George is so exactly right. I wonder whether this success of yours has filled your heart?"

Jess admitted as much, adding:

"I want to justify my leaving home."

"But this London engagement would do that."

"At Mr. Cherrington's expense."

"But that is his affair." Jess remained silent, obtruding her firm little chin. "I shall leave you to deal with him. Such a chance is unlikely to occur again. You are in an amazing vein of luck; you

ought to back it. Properly launched at Orford's theatre, you will become known to everybody who counts in our profession."

Soon afterwards, Jess saw Cherry, who exhausted his arguments. Nothing, perhaps, is more exasperating to a young man, as a self-constituted altruist, than to be denied the privilege of helping a friend.

"You have helped me quite enough," said Jess. "I can pay part of the debt by playing 'Giggles,' and I mean to do it."

"You can go on playing 'Giggles' for another two months. By that time, our play will be established. Do you think that nobody else can take your place? Owbridge tells me you were a bit off last night. He asked me to slate you."

"Go ahead and do it."

Baffled but persistent, Cherry tried another argument.

"You say you want to help me?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Right. Has it occurred to you, that if you get near the front, you might share the limelight with me. You might be able to work Orford. My new play might be done at his theatre with you in the lead."

This dizzy prospect made the owlet blink. Under more pressure she consented to think it over. Cherrington wisely left her alone. Within a few hours he learnt from Miss Oldacre the fate of the hussar. But his natural satisfaction in a rival's discomfiture was chastened by what followed:

"I believe the child is madly in love with the stage. Just as I was."

Cherrington demanded biographical details. Nothing loth, Miss Oldacre indulged in retrospection. She had sent half a dozen fairy princes back to fairyland, without regrets then, or thereafter.

"It is a passion in our family," she concluded.

"Yeo is a fine stage name. It suggests the Spanish Main—doubloons, traffics, and discoveries. If she has it in her——!"

That became the crux of a vexed question, the screaming note of interrogation. Miss Oldacre, looking—so Cherry thought—like Venus, Minerva, and Juno rolled into one, declared her intention of coaching Jess in the new part, whether she played in it or not, adding roguishly:

"Do you think Marguerite would have accepted the pearls, if Faust had not sent them? Wait till the part gets hold of her!"

"By Jove, yes; we shan't have to wait long"

V

Jess was willing enough to study any part under Miss Oldacre. Gratitude overwhelmed her. Under pledge of secrecy she told Florrie that a London engagement had been dangled before her. But she had not reckoned with Florrie's inquisitiveness and perspicacity. Otherwise, she might have confided in the leading lady, who would have perished at the stake rather than ask an indiscreet question. Florrie pounced on the truth, shook it between her teeth:

"Mr. Cherrington worked this."

"Can't you keep names out of this?"

"Not me. Never could. Well, I must say that

he's a boy worth having. Didn't I tell you that he could boom you sky high? He's willing to let you go out of our cast, because he's crazy for love of you. He's a knock-out. Muds said he was a perfect gentleman."

"The dresser made that observation about him."

"Muds made it to me. I do hope they won't get a cat to take your place."

"Don't worry! I'm not going."

We can imagine what Florrie said, and how she said it, with a brutal frankness that left Jess gasping. Incidentally, she effected what Cherrington and Miss Oldacre had failed to bring about: a change in the point of view. Florrie, somehow, made it aggressively plain that what Cherrington offered so generously must be accepted as generously. Her other argument, rubbed in like liniment, that Fortune must be taken at the flood, that clever actresses grew old and weary in the provinces, was negligible. Miss Oldacre had said the same with twice as much conviction behind it. Then Florrie fired her last shot:

"He means to turn you from a glow-worm into a star. You can pay him in full. Marry him! My! What a combination! And what an 'ad.' for our show! If you don't marry the pore fellow, he'll go into a decline."

This conviction had been gleaned from novelettes, but Jess was too distressed to think of that. She recalled what Miss Oldacre had said about happiness, and its effect on work. Florrie was a comical object lesson. She was happy, and happiness made her attractive as "Saucy Sal." If Cherrington were happy, his work would bloom and blossom.

Jess was drinking tea with Florrie when this confidential talk took place. Muds and Florrie were in lodgings not far from the theatre, usually let to just such birds of passage. Mother and daughter shared a large bed-sitting-room garishly furbished and furnished. An odour of cheese could be detected by a sensitive nostril. The fire burned with praiseworthy reluctance, piled up with ovoids. Florrie said with mordant significance :

"Your boy can't bear the thought of a room like this for you."

It was easy for Jess to imagine herself in such a room. Indeed, she had faced the possibility without wincing. Florrie made a grimace :

"This is above the average. And the landladies——! Muds can deal with 'em. Thieves and liars! Muds is sarcastic. This morning we found about two pounds gone out of our ham. The landlady swore she hadn't touched ham since the war. Muds said: 'If I didn't know you was the most truthful of women, Mrs. Sharp, I shouldn't believe you.' You couldn't curl 'em up that way."

"No," said Jess pensively.

Very soon the company would leave Manchester for Birmingham. Cherrington would then return to London, carrying to Orford the yea or nay of Jess. Pumford, meanwhile, was informed by Miss Oldacre of Orford's offer, and asked to give his consent. He did so grudgingly, after he had heard that Jess wished to remain faithful to the present company.

"She is straight. And I suppose we mustn't stand in the way. But can she do it?"

"I think so; I am coaching her."

" Her luck beats me."

Upon the eve of leaving Manchester, after three days' coaching, Miss Oldacre told Cherry that Jess was " eating " her part, assimilating every line of it. She could reproduce the most subtile inflections of the voice, apparently without difficulty.

" It *is* in her," declared Miss Oldacre with solemnity.

But Cherrington was not permitted to assist at the schooling. He would be invited to pass judgment later. And the fateful decision still rested in abeyance. Jess, possibly, may have expected Cherrington to make love to her. He deliberately abstained, thereby kindling surprise and misgiving. His friendliness, his easy manner, provoked the suspicion that, as a lover, she might have lost him. Poor George faded out of her mind. If she had to choose between the two men, Cherrington would be taken. She could see herself, dimly, as the wife of Cherrington, living and working in London. It would be an ideal partnership, if she loved him. Did she love him ?

There were dark moments when she contemplated seriously a return to Sloden-Pauncefort. She thought she could understand why girls buried themselves in nunneries. Such moments soon passed, because she was sensible of a driving power, either within or without, which she must obey blindly. On the stage, or studying with Miss Oldacre, she forgot all perplexities. And this faculty of detachment appeared to be the God-given attribute of artists. Miss Oldacre had been acting in London when a bomb fell close to the theatre.

" Weren't you terrified ? " asked Jess.

" Not till I came off the stage. Then I nearly collapsed. My dresser saved an abject situation. She had rushed into the Strand and seen what she called 'remains.' She said to me: ' This war is getting serious.' And I nearly died of laughter."

" You didn't forget your lines ? "

" My dear, in that play I was always forgetting my lines, but never a line failed me after the bomb fell."

" How wonderful ! "

Satisfied with her pupil's ability so far as mere diction was concerned, Miss Oldacre essayed the more difficult task of teaching gesture and deportment. She would make Jess cross the room and sit down twenty times in succession. Merely to listen to this past mistress of the arts was an education. Script in hand, she would pace up and down the parlour laying down her laws with irresistible charm.

" What have we here, Jess ? Stage direction. Leila invites the young man to sit down, with a gesture. I am the young man. Invite me, please, to sit down."

Jess made a gesture.

" No, no ; that is not sufficiently inviting. You indicate a chair. Much more is needed. What is passing through Leila's mind ? She expects this young man to propose. She hopes and fears—and fears—that he will. She is horribly shy, a-quiver from tip to toe. The gesture must be illuminating, provocative, and graceful, not so much an invitation to sit down, but an invitation to relieve his mind and hers."

Jess tried again.

"That is better. But——! Imagine yourself to be Jack. I am Leila. Jack enters, Leila holds out her hand like this . . ."

Jess clapped her hands instead of taking the hand of Leila. In her inimitable fashion, Miss Oldacre had conveyed everything. Leila was revealed to an imaginary audience.

"I can never do it."

"I shall smack you. My dear father used to say that sometimes he had to make his leading lady cry. Tears seem to relax a woman's muscles and tissues. Try again."

Good temper and patience triumphed. Admittedly Jess was an apt pupil, amazingly receptive, as Crewe had discovered. But Crewe lacked genius. He had never possessed the Oldacre technique. The schooling was never overdone. A willing horse should not be asked to jump more than twenty fences in a morning. After each fence Miss Oldacre rested herself and her pupil. Jess would ask many questions.

"Can you play when you are ill?"

"I cease to be ill when I play. I can't account for such a miracle. I have left my dressing-room hardly able to speak, with a voice as harsh and hoarse as a crow's. Once on, my voice comes back. I sprained my ankle on the eve of a *première*. I limped on. In a jiffy the limp vanished to reappear as I made my exit."

"Christian Science might explain that."

"Perhaps. I prefer the more obvious word—imagination. I have it; so have you. To work—!

Smile deprecatingly! Keep your hands quiet. Do you want the audience to look at your hands or your mouth? That's excellent. Try the smile derisive. Not bad. Now the smile triumphant, as you give it in our play. All those smiles must be on tap."

Finally, at the last moment, Cherry was invited to pass judgment. If Jess had captivated George with a new frock, we can imagine what effect she produced in Cherry in a new part, a part that exacted a manifestation of all beguiling qualities. At the end, he said fervently:

"You must do it. I shall cut my throat if you don't."

"She will cut her own," amended Miss Oldacre.

She left them alone. Cherrington was entitled to that. As he closed the door of the parlour and turned round Jess was "discovered" blushing. He sat down beside her, no longer master of himself, unable to conceal the love-light in his eyes, but self-pledged to endure patiently and silently till the ban was lifted.

Jess, however, remained Leila. And, for the moment, she beheld Cherry as Jack, her stage lover. This may account partly for what followed. Afterwards Jess was unable to determine whether or not she was acting. A spell fell upon her. Certainly she was ignoring the fourth dimension, as Pellie interpreted it. Thoughts of the future vanished. The present became a sort of dream. In Cherrington she beheld the true lover, the type of all true lovers. She was thirsting for his praise and what else? If he kissed her——! He didn't. He stared at the carpet; he fidgeted with his restless fingers.

" You are pleased with me ? "

" I am enchanted."

Why didn't he look at her ?

VI

Stealing a shy glance at him, she perceived that his face was white and rigid. Florrie's words came back to her. " He'll go into a decline." It was wonderful to think that a man might suffer abominably for love of a woman. She had made George suffer, but he had displayed remarkable recuperative qualities. Within a few miles of Canterbury he was pursuing foxes with an ardour that relieved Jess of serious anxiety. In a letter received from him that morning the hussar had spoken of pig-sticking in India with enthusiasm.

" Are you going to do it ? " asked Cherry.

" Perhaps."

" That won't do, Jess. Orford won't take your ' perhaps.' "

" I may do this—on conditions."

" What conditions ? "

But Jess was too clever to state the true conditions. Fired by the generosity of her lover, she had soared to a level even beyond his. She had made up a tired mind to marry him, firmly believing that marriage would be best for him and for herself. She would give a good fellow his heart's desire, not analysing too delicately her own sensibilities, sensibilities at the moment in flux. It would be fatuous to attempt excuses for a very young woman confronted suddenly with ambitions which she was

too inexperienced to guide or control. Her knowledge, her conviction, that Cherrington loved her seemed to kindle anger against herself, because she was honest enough to acknowledge that the passion which informed her waking and sleeping hours was the overmastering desire to "make good" as an actress. And this, elementally, was a selfish ambition. As an antidote to "self-expression" (even her thoughts resolved themselves into stage terms), she decided too swiftly that conjugal devotion would serve to adjust the balance. Millions of men and women have attempted this compromise with life, because they are fundamentally ignorant of life.

She was aware, of course, that if she stated the conditions baldly, Cherrington would be too proud to accept them. Acting, therefore, seemed to be imposed upon her, although she was hardly conscious of this at the time. And she was within measurable distance of loving Cherry as he wanted to be loved. To take the step between friendship and love, to leap gaily across a ridiculously small ditch, became a feat of the imagination. She could imagine so easily what a girl really in love, such a girl as Leila in Orford's play, would say and do. Indeed, as has been hinted already, Leila possessed her. Leila's innocent wiles were at her command, a complete battery . . .

She answered softly :

"If I refused this wonderful offer, if I remained in your play, what would you do, Cherry?"

Cherrington had not considered this improbability. He answered with a shade of irritation :

"Do? I should want to shake you, I suppose."

"Shake me—off?"

"You would go your way; I should go mine; I am thinking of Dartmoor as a sort of sanctuary."

"Dartmoor? Wouldn't you be rather lonely on Dartmoor?"

"I wish you would cut me out of this."

"But I can't. You have been thinking a lot about me. Suppose that I have been thinking of—you."

The melting sweetness of her tones, which a less excitable listener might have recognised as belonging to Miss Oldacre, brought colour to his cheeks. Purposely, he had stared at the carpet. Raising his eyes to hers, he beheld what an audience would have recognised as love flooding the grey orbs in which he discovered the reflected image of himself. Upon her drooping lips flickered the smile deprecatory. Her hands, loosely clasped upon her lap, remained still. It did not occur to him that Leila looked like this, just one minute before the bashful Jack proposed. He remained speechless with astonishment. Jess whispered another sentence:

"I asked you to be patient with me."

"Heavens! Do you want me to be impatient?"

She blushed the answer. A dimple showed.

If what followed could be translated to the stage, the success of any romantic comedy would be assured. The pretty scene played itself, so naturally, so cumulatively, that Orford would have shed tears because the "house" was empty. Possibly, the sprites that hover about us unseen enjoyed themselves. Cherrington, tacitly encouraged to betray impatience, was artist enough to curb impatience.

A gourmet sips a rare wine slowly. Cherrington took the maid's hand and kissed it from finger tips to wrist. Turning it over, he examined the lines in the pink palm. They stretched—the triple lines of head and heart and destiny—firmly and clearly into the future. He assuaged an ever-increasing thirst upon the Mount of Aphrodite. The nymph surrendered unconditionally when the wandering pilgrim reached her lips. Can we blame him, if he mistook the tremors of the virgin, her soft sighs, her beating heart, for the passion which radiated from him?

Unquestionably she was his!

The conditions, never put into words, were accepted.

VII

At Birmingham, some ten days later, the romantic engagement became public property. As Florrie had predicted, such a happy combination served as an "ad." for the "show." Business went up at once. By this time, Miss Oldacre was prepared to "guarantee" her pupil. Orford, by return of post, submitted a contract, duly signed. Jess was booked to appear in London on Easter Monday. She would receive the same salary as the actress leaving the cast—a salary, if it continued, that adjusted the problem of ways and means. The path to the altar lay smooth and shining before our lovers. But it did not appear so to Mr. and Mrs. Yeo.

George, unfortunately, had told his mother that he adored Jess. The thruster admitted that the darling was "rushed" into refusing what must have

appeared to her at the moment the "leavings" of Miss Irene Seaton, whose tomb dogs were invited to defile. Mrs. Apperton, forthwith, took tea and counsel with Mrs. Yeo. The two mothers comforted each other. All would be well. A beneficent Providence attended to such affairs, which might be regarded as His particular business. The Squire swore roundly that George seemed to have come to his senses. Jess would be welcomed as a daughter—damn all "in-laws"—at Apperton Old Manor. Mr. Yeo and he toasted Jess over a glass of '47 port, taken from a bottle—one of five—reserved for sacrosanct occasions. Mr. Yeo, warmed by the ichor of the grape, expressed his conviction that a marriage so exactly right must take place. The dear child had been stage-struck. George, after his own illuminating experience, could be trusted to eradicate all that nonsense. Life in India would "biggen" Jess!

Upon these delightful and engrossing possibilities fell the news of Miss Yeo's engagement to Mr. Cherrington of The Laurels, Surbiton.

No pen could adequately describe the animosities engendered in two Christian households, now united against a common disturber of their peace. Mr. Yeo found in his wardrobe a black tail-coat smelling of moth balls, and a pre-war tall-hat rescued from a jumble sale to serve at funerals. Thus accoutred, he took the field and the road to Birmingham. His parting words to his faithful consort indicated at once his feelings and his determination:

"You had better get her room ready. I shall bring her back with me."

A telegram warned Jess that her sire might be expected that same evening.

He arrived in an unhappy temper of body and mind. Having taken a first-class ticket, he was obliged by perverse necessity to travel the last stage of his journey in the guard's van. Talk with the guard had further exacerbated him. It was intolerable to reflect that Labour, now overpaid, threatened revolution, a general upheaval. Industrial England seemed to have gone mad. The guard happened to be a glib talker, able to hold his own, and eager to acquire more than his own. The rights of the working man to enjoy privileges hitherto denied lay upon his tongue's tip. Mr. Yeo, fortified by the perusal of leading articles in *The Morning Post*, dealt drastically with a public servant. Nature, he pointed out, admitted no such rights as those so impudently claimed by Labour. Place this pack of agitators, whose mere faces as portrayed in the picture press were enough to commend them to the hangman, upon a desert island and what, pray, became of their right to live? He ended trenchantly:

"There is no substitute for sweat, my man."

He left the van without tipping the Apostle of the Right to Live, and reached the hotel chilled to the bone, warmed only by indignation. Jess received him with exasperating composure.

"Dear father, we won't discuss anything till you have dined. Then I must go to the theatre. After breakfast, to-morrow morning, we shall be undisturbed."

"I can say what I've come here to say, Jessica, at dinner."

They dined alone at half-past six, an hour at least too early for an elderly gentleman the slave of habit. Till he had spoken with and to Jess, Mr. Yeo refused to meet Cherrington or Miss Oldacre. Indeed, as he washed his hands before dinner, he was uncomfortably aware of the astounding change in his daughter, whom, in a vague fashion, he regarded as in league with Labour. "We shall hear about her Rights," he reflected.

Jess had engaged a small table in the big dining-room. A big table, not far away, was surrounded with profiteers, who drank champagne with an air which challenged the conjecture that they could bathe in it, if fancy so beguiled them. These stout, red-faced fellows annoyed Mr. Yeo. Their loud laughter jarred upon him.

"Brummagem," he growled.

"I think they are going to our show," said Jess.

"I heard something."

"Show! That describes theatrical performances."

"Do you want to see the play?" asked Jess.

"You can have a box to yourself."

Mr. Yeo shook his hoary head as he attacked his soup. He resented the stares of the roysterers at his daughter. His name was on their thick lips. Well, the sooner that honoured name was withdrawn from cheap circulation the better. At the moment, he was in possession of the bare fact of the engagement. Jess wished to marry the author of her "show." He was the son of a stockbroker who lived at Surbiton. Whether or not Mr. Arthur Cherrington could support a wife remained to be discovered.

"Will you drink claret, father?"

"Whisky and plain water."

"But you take soda-water at home."

"Plain water, please."

The memory of a first-class ticket wasted in a guard's van still rankled.

"Now, Jessica, has this young man independent means? As a father solicitous for your welfare, I must insist upon a satisfactory answer to that question."

"You can ask him, father. He has supported himself entirely for many years. He won scholarships. He practically paid for his own education at Eton and Oxford."

Eton and Oxford tickled agreeably Mr. Yeo's ears. He continued in a milder tone:

"The pound to-day is worth ten shillings. I see no reason for hoping that it will be worth more during my lifetime. Let that pass. Are you contemplating a long engagement with a hypothetical marriage at the end of it?"

"Oh, no. Cherry and I hope to be married as reasonably soon as possible."

"Cherry? You call him—Cherry?"

He frowned portentously, watching straws upon the current. To speak of the man whom you proposed to love, honour, and obey as Cherry, seemed to Mr. Yeo to be turning a sacrament of the Church into comic opera.

"To please you, daddy, I can speak of him as Arthur. That suggests to me the old joke—'Our thermometer.'"

This old joke, new to Mr. Yeo, escaped notice.

"Surely you have some idea what your joint income will be?"

Jess brightened.

"Oh, yes. Roughly speaking, something between fifteen hundred and two thousand a year."

Mr. Yeo was visibly impressed. But he knew nothing of the London engagement.

"You astonish me, Jess. If this young man can earn fifteen hundred a year with his pen, I wonder we have not heard more of him."

"I said—joint income. I hope to contribute something."

"Ah! I confess that it's not easy to follow you. Your income, such as it is, a very unsubstantial source of revenue at best, depends upon your remaining on the stage. I take it that this young fellow doesn't propose to traipse round our provincial towns after you? What a life!"

"As to that," Jess replied, "it is life and not stagnation."

"Stagnation! Is it stagnation to make home attractive, to—to build the right nest, in short, to prepare for the—a—nestlings?"

Jess laughed. Being "straight" she valiantly resisted a temptation to tease so ingenuous a sire.

"I have accepted an important engagement in London."

"Bless my soul!"

"You are as surprised as I am," said Jess modestly.

"I owe this extraordinary bit of luck to Miss Oldacre and—and Arthur. Of course, I may fail, but I am not very nervous about that."

"Where is this engagement?"

"With Mr. Orford, at his theatre."

Mr. Yeo opened his eyes even wider. He stared at a young woman whom he could barely recognise as his daughter. Her air of assurance, her voice, with its new and bewildering inflections, her brighter plumage, confounded him. Pride in her rose first to the surface. Behind this festered the memory of his kinswoman, just as attractive, very dear to him, regarded for many years as a sister. And that Minotaur, the Stage, had swallowed her! Nevertheless, the mere thought of his little Jess upon Orford's time-honoured boards, accepted by the doyen of managers, playing an "important" engagement, gave him pause. He had, so he told himself, to reconstruct the child, no easy task for a man warped by convention and tradition. He had been, in his autocratic way, a just judge. To prejudice anybody, except a Babu, was alien to him.

He muttered confusedly :

"I shall go to what you call your 'show' to-night."

Jess was delighted. She insisted upon leaving the table to 'phone to the box-office. From this excursion she returned smiling. A box was at Mr. Yeo's service. During her brief absence, the father decided to mark time, and graciously said so. Jess displayed two dimples.

"That is ever so nice of you, daddy. You will see me again in a part not half so good as the one I am offered, and you will form a more critical opinion of Arthur as a playwright."

Mr. Yeo nodded with Olympian majesty.

VIII

Cherrington, at a word from Jess, kept out of the box. It was arranged that he should meet Mr. Yeo on the morrow. But Pumford, round and rosy, received the august visitor royally. The box communicated with an ante-room, in which whisky and soda and cigars were placed upon a table. Pummy presented a programme. Quite unaware of Mr. Yeo's prejudice against the stage, the little man held forth with enthusiasm upon the new star rising steadily above the horizon. This was before the curtain went up.

"You can prepare for a treat, my dear sir. I opposed your daughter coming to us on general principles. I detest amateurs. I told Miss Yeo that we were overpaying her. We are not. She's a draw. None of us, not even Miss Oldacre, can account for her success. It's the sort of thing that happens once in a blue moon. We can only conclude that it's in her—born in her. Perhaps, she harks back to some distinguished actor or actress in your family?"

Mr. Yeo solemnly assured him that this was not the case. Pummy continued:

"Losing her, as we must, is a blow to the box-office. But could I stand in her path, I ask you?"

Mr. Yeo fervently wished that Mr. Pumford could, but he dared not say so. Pummy withdrew, promising to return after the first act.

Mr. Yeo was left alone, caressing nervously his silk hat. Pummy had impressed him as an alert man of business. If it were true that Jess was a

star, and *knew it*, his long tiring journey had been taken in vain. However, of her aptitudes for this wretched calling, he would trust no opinion save his own. Engrossed in unhappy thoughts, he watched the curtain ascend, and clapped his hands with the crowd when he recognised Miss Oldacre. It is due to him to add that he regarded the famous actress as a genius. She belonged to his generation; she had bewitched him long ago.

Giggles came on and vanished.

Mr. Yeo, of course, had seen the performance at the Castle. It is to his credit as an observer that he recognised instantly the immense improvement in Giggles. The applause that greeted her prepared him for that. And the roar of laughter that followed her exit a minute later sent a shiver down his spine.

"She is a draw," he murmured to himself.

The fall of the first curtain confirmed this. Pummy appeared, rubbing his plump hands.

"She gets over, Mr. Yeo, she gets over, doesn't she?"

"She gets over me," admitted Mr. Yeo reluctantly. "I suppose Miss Oldacre taught her how to do it."

"Miss Oldacre is the kindest and cleverest of women, but she had the right stuff to work on—the clay. Mr. Cherrington has written up the part. A very clever young man. What a partnership! You agree?"

"I have seen the play at Sloden Castle. It didn't impress me."

"My dear sir—done by amateurs! May I offer my heartiest congratulations?" Not waiting to observe how these were received, Pummy continued,

dropping his voice to a whisper: "All things are possible when a rising young actress marries a rising young dramatist. Mr. Cherrington will write another 'Peg o' my Heart.'"

Mr. Yeo, to the utter confounding of the little man, had never heard of "Peg o' my Heart," or its author, or Miss Laurette Taylor.

"The comedy, Mr. Yeo, was written round the actress, and then presented to her—a royal gift. I hesitate to say what that comedy has earned. Shall we say, roughly, a quarter of a million?"

"Pounds, shillings, or pence?" asked Mr. Yeo.

"Pounds, my dear sir, pounds."

The Second Act stopped further talk. Mr. Yeo tried to concentrate attention upon the play, but his mind dwelt upon the quarter of a million pounds earned by "Peg o' my Heart." If one could believe anybody connected with the stage such a statement outraged all sense of proportion. He contrasted his labours at Burrahbugpore with the labours of Miss Laurette Taylor's husband. He recalled a paragraph setting forth the earnings of Charlie Chaplin and Miss Mary Pickford. Nevertheless, he kept his eye on Giggles.

When the comedy was over, he became conscious of fatigue, and quite unable to marshal into order a thousand and one importunate reflections. As an honest man he had to admit that Jess and her putative husband shared something that might be described as a triumph. Beyond that conclusion he refused to budge, declining Miss Oldacre's invitation to supper.

He went to bed the most uneasy man in Birmingham.

IX

He woke—unrefreshed.

Shaving himself, staring at a troubled face in an unflattering looking-glass, he thought :

" I'm an old man. I was a fool to leave home. There's no fool like an old fool."

Jess, he realised, was out of hand, beyond his authority, independent of him and the family, with new friends, new interests, and presumably in love with a clever young man whom he had never seen. If he attempted to play the Roman father, he would make himself ridiculous. And soon, within a few years at most, he must go, leaving behind him a strange world that he couldn't understand. That was the dominant reflection as he dressed. He had lived and worked in a world that he did understand. He was grateful for that. In this humble frame of mind, he knelt down to pray, as was his habit. He may have repeated his prayers mechanically. In form they had not changed during fifty years. All his long life he had believed in a Personal Deity, whose inscrutable decrees must be accepted. He regarded his present grievous perplexity as a trial imposed by God. Resignedly he commended himself and his family to Omnipotence, and rose from his knees.

Jess poured out his coffee for him. In the bright light of a frosty morning, she looked about eighteen, a pretty child. But she was a woman. He must remember that.

" Did you sleep well ? " she asked.

" Not too well, my dear."

"I—I can guess how you are feeling, daddy."

He smiled grimly, saying nothing. How could any young girl guess his feelings? He was guessing at them himself. He was trying to reconcile an odd pride in her with his ineradicable prejudice against the stage; he was bracing himself for the coming encounter with Cherrington, whose sharp wits might be exercised upon a brain no longer alert, and at the moment strangely fatigued. The soft voice of Jess went on: "I am a disappointment to you. I am ever so sorry."

He made a deprecating gesture. Having lived long in the East, he may have absorbed, unconsciously, something of the fatalism of Hindus and Mahommedans. He said mildly:

"This bacon is better than we get at home."

He was smoking his after-breakfast pipe in a small sitting-room when Cherrington came in.

"This is Arthur, father."

They shook hands solemnly. Cherrington sat down after a few words had been interchanged, and Jess slipped from the room.

"You want to marry my daughter?"

The old man looked formidable sitting erect in his chair, head up, a massive personality.

"Yes, sir; more than anything else in the world."

"That is as it should be. Are you able to support her in the—a—comfort to which she is accustomed?"

"I am not in a position to make a settlement, Mr. Yeo. I earn my income with my pen."

"Just so. I understand that. If your pen should fail——?"

His first impression of the penman was not unfavourable. He appeared to be a gentleman, with good manners. There was no taint of the long-haired Bohemian about him.

"If my pen should fail?" repeated Cherry. "I have considered that. Would you refuse your consent, Mr. Yeo, to the marriage of your daughter to a rising barrister, or a doctor with an increasing practice? A barrister or a doctor might become blind or incapacitated. Forgive me if I mention George Apperton. You would consent to Jess marrying him?"

Mr. Yeo inclined his head.

"He is the son and heir of your squire, but what he earns would not support Jess in comfort. We happen to be living in strange times."

Mr. Yeo agreed.

"It is impossible to predict what might happen in this country. Land might be nationalised. If a revolutionary party came into power, the squire of Sloden-Pauncefort might find himself cruelly impoverished. That is not very likely to happen, but it might. In the same sense my pen might fail. If it did——"

"Go on!"

"My wife would be earning money."

"You wish her to remain on the stage?"

"Of course. She wishes it. That is enough for me."

"What is she likely to earn?"

"That is impossible to say. Anything between five hundred and five thousand a year. I am in the same boat. I can earn five hundred a year and

more as a journalist. As a dramatist I might be paying super-tax next year."

"What did you earn last year?"

"About twelve hundred pounds. My fees for this comedy average about forty-five pounds a week."

"What a gamble it all is!"

"Life is a gamble from the cradle to the grave."

Mr. Yeo remained silent. He detested gambling in all its forms, but what could he say, what could he do to prevent a marriage which he distrusted instinctively. This young man's arguments were sound. He acknowledged to himself that a retired civil servant on a pension could not refuse consent to a marriage between a rising barrister or doctor and his daughter. And if that daughter could earn an income, dared he raise a finger to prevent it? And if he did, would paternal authority outweigh personal predilection?

He asked a few more questions, dismally conscious that youth must be served, that age had no fighting chance against it. It was some comfort to learn that Cherrington *père* was the head of a sound, conservative business. He might be worth what old-fashioned folk call—a plum. To use an expression familiar to Mr. Yeo—he might "cut up" handsomely. And his son had won scholarships. Apparently he could have passed the Indian Civil Service examination. Had he thought of that?

"I suppose I am ambitious, Mr. Yeo. So is Jess."

Finally, Mr. Yeo retired from the unequal contest. He did so with a certain dignity and pathos.

"I am an old man; I tread the old paths. I

cannot withhold my consent to your marriage with Jess. The details must be arranged with her mother. I take for granted that you come into court with clean hands ? ”

“ I can refer you to my father. Like you, he has a prejudice against the stage, but we are good friends.”

Mr. Yeo returned to Sloden-Pauncefort next day, heartened up a little after a confidential talk with Miss Oldacre. He was surprised to discover that she had favoured George, but she admitted frankly that, at the time, she had not taken sufficiently into account the ambitions and capacities of Jess revealed almost blindingly within the past fortnight.

“ She may become a great actress.”

Alone with Mrs. Yeo, Mr. Yeo exhibited a touching humility. Together they walked to the high ground above the village whence a panoramic view could be obtained of the magnificent Forest of Ys and the lovely valley that lay between Sloden-Pauncefort and Melchester. Peace brooded upon the hills and water meadows. The great woods were slumbering, awaiting the touch of spring. They strolled slowly upon crisp heather.

“ She has gone out of our lives,” said Mr. Yeo. “ She wants excitements, triumphs, the roar of the crowd. These do not make for happiness. And I can do nothing—nothing ! ”

CHAPTER VII

MISS JESSICA YEO'S HUSBAND

I

CHERRY and Jess were married quietly in London. A wedding at Sloden-Pauncefort would have pleased Mrs. Yeo, but Jess, somewhat to her mother's astonishment, disdained the flummery that accompanies white satin and orange blossom.

"Really," she said, "I ought to consider the feelings of the Appertons. Also, I must play 'Giggles' up to the last moment, and then begin rehearsing 'Leila' at Mr. Orford's theatre."

Poor Mrs. Yeo accepted this as final. She beheld Truth decently draped; her daughter was more concerned with the frocks which were ordered for "Leila" than her wedding gown. Nevertheless, the Yeo family assisted at the ceremony, and were captivated by Cherry's manners. Jess warned him in good season: "You must be extra nice to your 'in-law's.' I shall be just as nice to yours." Accordingly, The Cedars and The Laurels met without friction, and were pleased with each other, although each family secretly was of opinion that their representative might have done better.

Throughout the ceremony Jess felt she was playing a part in a play. But as a bride she "got over." Everybody was impressed except herself. After the

benediction, with the ring upon her finger, and a pen in her hand to sign the register, it was difficult to realise what had taken place. She kept on thinking: "I am married; this is as serious as death"; but she wasn't thrilled as she wished to be.

Sir Egerton Pell officiated as best man. His aged uncle died suddenly before the company left Birmingham. Mrs. Yeo eyed his small trim figure with melancholy resignation, firmly believing that Jess—had she wished—might have been Lady Pell. She was singularly uplifted when she perceived the Duke and Duchess of Sloden upon the Yeo side of the aisle. After this discovery the atmosphere of the London church became ampler. And outside the sun was shining between showers.

Bride and groom motored to Brighton for the week-end. When Jess found herself beside her husband in the car, he said in a jolly voice:

"This is a great adventure, dearest, isn't it?"

"I want it to be that."

"We must get all the fun we can out of ourselves. Do you feel very shy?"

"Not yet."

"I do. I expect that is generally the case. The man is rather terrified of 'rushing' things, of—of gulping them down. I wouldn't rush you, you sweet Jess, for all the world. I wish you would promise me something."

"Yes?"

"If you want to be alone, tell me. If you want to be silent, tell me. I shall understand."

"I believe you will," said Jess. "Now you must promise me something, something not very easy."

"I'll do anything, you darling," declared the fervent lover.

"But this is an—abstention. You must abstain, I must abstain."

He laughed nervously:

"Abstain from what?"

"From talking shop."

Cherry's laugh betrayed no nervousness, as he replied quickly:

"Why, of course, but two persons who are as interested in the stage as we are can't talk shop about it unless a third person is present, like your father, who hates the stage. Why do you ask this, dearest?"

"You see I have been obsessed by the stage for the past three months. I want to get away from it for a bit, to see myself and you, not as dramatist and actress, but just as man and woman. The funny thing is that I see you quite plainly as a man, but I don't see myself as Jess Cherrington. I hope that to-night the wind will be blowing and a big sea running."

"Why?"

"After dinner, I want to go for a walk with you in the wind and rain. I want my cobwebs blown out of me. You spoke to me once of the lure of the Wild. I feel that now. I want it to blow so hard to-night that I shall have to hang on to you."

"What a creature of fancy!"

"I fancy the fourth dimension."

But she had to explain what Pellie had meant by this, and its application to themselves. At once Cherrington became eager. Life beyond the foot-lights couldn't be ignored. Willy, nilly, it in-
P

itself. Marriage was a jump into life even as death, so far as he knew, appeared to be a jump out of it. Jess listened to him, faintly smiling, sensible that the speaker lacked special knowledge of his theme, although, possibly his imaginative powers were greater than her own. They were putting to sea without the compass of experience. That made the voyage more exciting.

They reached Brighton without misadventure, where rooms at a big hotel had been engaged for them by Cherrington *père*, a bridal suite in white and rose, suggesting a French *bonbonnière*. The old stockbroker had generously insisted upon paying for this and the hire of the limousine which was at the disposal of the young people for the week-end. When Jess thanked him, he said bluffly:

"Arthur hasn't cost me much, my dear. I'm glad to do this for you."

They dined at a small table in the big dining-room, conscious of amused onlookers.

"Let 'em stare," said Cherry valiantly. "I'm proud of my bride. All these fellows are envying me."

"The wind is howling," observed Jess.

The rain began to fall before coffee was served. Cherry became solicitous.

"It's such a dirty night, darling."

But Jess insisted on braving the weather. Arrayed in mackintoshes, they walked, arm in arm, along the front towards Hove. The wet esplanade reflected a myriad lights, but few foot-passengers were abroad. Below, the great combers broke furiously upon the shore, roaring and hissing. Spume of the sea salted their faces.

"Isn't it glorious?" whispered Jess, with her mouth close to his ear.

They stood still, confronting the south-west gale. Jess had to cling to him.

"Are the cobwebs blown out of you?" he asked.

"Yes," she panted, lifting her dancing eyes to his. He realised that she was thrilled and excited. Whether by him, or by the storm, or by something within herself he could not say. The elements made them elemental. He knew that she would be affronted if he asked her the question on his lips: "Aren't you getting wet?" But when he kissed her, she laughed, saying:

"Isn't it like kissing a mackintosh?"

"I have never kissed one, but I could kiss yours."

They pushed on, splashing through puddles, like two children. Here and there, above them, a star flashed its message from a rift in the clouds.

"It wishes us luck," said Cherry.

The universe seemed to be theirs.

They returned to the white and rose sitting-room where logs were burning gaily in a dog grate. Throwing off cap and coat, Jess stared at a pair of thin silk stockings, sopping wet.

"Sit down!" commanded Cherry.

He drew an easy chair near to the fire. Then he knelt down and began to unlace her shoes.

"I shall dry your dear feet."

Jess blushed but submitted. He was making her glad that she was his so tenderly, so delicately, that she thanked God for such a lover. He placed her feet upon a cushion, sat down on the carpet and leaned his head against her knees. He felt her cool

fingers upon his forehead, as she smoothed back his hair, thinking that it was finer in texture than her own. She wondered whether she could make him happy. Why was he so silent? What were his thoughts? Suddenly, he answered the unspoken question.

"What a beastly thing a marriage of convenience is!" he continued dreamily: "I have been thinking of some of the couples who have had these absurd rooms—I wish I could have taken you to a tent, but Miss Jessica Yeo might have objected to that."

"But I am Mrs. Arthur Cherrington."

"I can hardly believe it. And it isn't entirely true."

"Are you gently breaking to me that you have another wife living?"

"I have to share you with the British Public."

He felt her fingers closing his lips. He remembered her injunction about not talking shop. But if the British Public adored her, as they might, as they would, what then? He kissed her fingers in silence

"Are you tired, Jess?"

"Not a bit."

"Presently, I shall brush your hair."

"Can you?"

"Bless you! I'm a practised hand at it."

He felt her wince, and chuckled.

"If I can brush my own, I can brush yours, can't I?"

"Yes, if you like."

"You are trembling, Jess. I shouldn't ask to brush your hair to-night, if I had ever brushed another woman's. You know that?"

"I am ever so glad to know it. Wait here! Don't follow me!"

She slipped from the sitting-room. In a few minutes she came back, rosy as Aurora. Her hair rippled to her waist. She wore a white silk dressing-gown, embellished with true lovers' knots of pale blue riband, and her bare feet were thrust into blue slippers. She carried an ivory brush.

Cherrington gazed at his bride—spell-bound.

"I love you so much," he said unsteadily, "that I'm willing to keep vigil for you. You may be frightened; you may want to be alone. You look so extraordinarily young with your hair down. Not more than seventeen. If you say the word, I'll leave you alone, you dear maid."

She held out the hairbrush.

II

They returned on the Tuesday to the flat in West Kensington, and unpacked many wedding presents. On the Wednesday morning, Jess presented herself at Orford's theatre, where a rehearsal of understudies had been called. Orford sat with his business manager in the first row of the dress circle. Jess had asked her husband to stay away. She "went on" conscious of hostile looks and thoughts, because the understudy of the actress leaving the cast had expected to be given the part. By this time, however, Jess knew something, not much, of the jealousy which ravages, like a raging pestilence, nearly all members of the "profesh." She recalled Florrie's expression: "They'll ride you on to the rails." And such an attempt was made. The

understudies deliberately made things difficult, withholding the indescribable, minute gestures and looks which help an actress so tremendously. Had they realised that Orford was fully alive to their tricks, prudence might have restrained them. Really, the performance of Jess shone out the more conspicuously, because the others failed to "play up." Jess was nearly in tears, lacking the experience which might have told her that principals would not so imperil their own reputations. At the end of the rehearsal, Orford sent for her.

"I am pleased, Miss Yeo."

"But I played detestably."

"The others did, not you. Never mind! Next week, the principals shall be called. Meanwhile hold tight to what Miss Oldacre has taught you. I recognised some of her magic touches. We are both immensely indebted to that dear lady."

He talked very kindly to her, almost paternally, ending with a solemn warning:

"You mustn't get fat. I ought to add a clause to our agreement about a minimum weight."

"But why should I get fat, Mr. Orford?"

"You laugh. Laugh and grow fat. I'm not joking. It will be my business and pleasure to try and keep you exactly as you are. A young actress should keep as fit as a fencer. Each night, she has to fence with her audience."

"I am more likely to grow thin."

"That is even worse. Never worry!"

Jess found Cherry waiting for her, pale with anxiety, but colour came back to his cheeks when he heard that the man who mattered was pleased.

"Now," he said, "I shall be able to tackle my own work."

A fly, none the less, lurked in their ointment. Business at Orford's theatre had fallen off during Lent. And the expenses were enormous. The Easter holidays, probably, would "binge up" the box office. If not, the play would come off, and Jess, in that case, might find herself "resting." Cherry predicted that the second rehearsal would obliterate unpleasant memories of the first. He said savagely:

"If I know my Orford, those damned understudies will get beans."

He prophesied truly. Hostility was discreetly veiled next day, but Orford's seat in the dress circle remained empty till the principals were called. By this time, Jess felt reasonably sure of herself.

Leila met Jack.

Jack became her friend at once. His name was Lenox Hambrough, and he had fought with distinction in the war till a bullet laid him low. Jess soon decided that nothing less than a bullet could have done it. His faith in himself struck Jess as immeasurable, and not altogether unjustifiable. He "got" there delightfully, apparently without effort, because he believed so devoutly in his potentialities. After the first rehearsal, he said to Jess:

"It's going to be rare larks playing with you, because you are such a kid. I couldn't do myself justice with Leila, number one."

"She wanted to be number one herself."

Jack—he remained Jack to Jess—raised an

eyebrow at this, but he decided that the new Leila was too naïve to be suspected of irony.

"You have seen her play, of course?" Jess nodded solemnly, too discreet to criticise. Jack disdained discretion. He continued volubly: "She queered me, the jade. I simply couldn't stick her. You're It. Our scenes are going to be a treat."

Jess had a second interview with Orford. He was more than pleased, but portentously solemn, sounding a diapason note of warning. "No experiments, please!" Satan—so Jess was instructed—beguiled young actresses to "overplay" their parts. This appeared to be the unpardonable sin at Orford's theatre.

"Young Hambrough," continued Orford, "may lead you astray."

Jess opened eyes not quite so innocent as they appeared.

"Really? How nice of you to warn me!"

Orford, not Jess, blushed.

"I mean, my dear young lady, he may tempt you to 'gag.' Or to introduce fresh business, which the author, I can assure you, would never permit."

She capped this assurance with reassurance. She pledged herself to take liberties with no author—except her own.

"Your own, Miss Yeo?"

"My husband, Mr. Cherrington."

"Bless me! Of course. It's difficult to believe that you are married."

III

The marriage, however, served as an "ad." And a few paragraphs excited the curiosity of

London playgoers straining their eyes to discern new stars faintly twinkling in the firmament. Jess's first appearance was at a *matinée*. Both Pell and Cherrington deplored this. A *matinée* crowd—according to these high authorities—was usually lukewarm, not sufficiently "stoked up" by indifferent food and poor but expensive drink. But it would be a holiday crowd. On the other hand, as an offset to this, the players on Easter Monday would be played out, returning to work tired after four days' strenuous activities. It was whispered that a critic or two might be taking notes at the evening performance. Cherrington said complacently:

"It's in the air, Jess, that you are a bit of all right. How these things get about I can't guess. But some fellows at The Buskin, who think they know past, present and future, congratulated me. I dare say Pummy has been talking, and Miss Oldacre."

Jess had to admit that she was frightened out of her wits, which Pell assured her was a good sign, an omen of success.

To her great satisfaction, she was assigned a tiny dressing-room which reeked of Leila, number one, who affected scent with a basis of musk. Mrs. Hunkins, the dresser, sniffed aggressively whenever Leila, number one, was mentioned. She eyed Jess with approval, and submitted without protest to a widely-opened window.

The first performance went much as usual. Jess felt very nervous, unable to escape from self-consciousness, thinking all the time that Orford would be disappointed. The other principals,

excepting Jack, seemed to ignore her. They chattered about the Easter holiday. After the first act, Cherry cheered her up:

"Your chance will come later, perhaps to-night. The house is full, no paper. But it's a house that can't appreciate your best work."

"I haven't given them that."

"You will. Demand, in these cases, creates supply. You haven't yet realised the immense difference in audiences. This crowd, probably, prefers the old Leila. Not one out of twenty knows or cares that a new Leila is playing. So—buck up!"

Jack was waiting for her at the foot of the stone staircase.

"This isn't our day out," he whispered. "Don't worry about that! We're playing to the suburbs. But they'll eat our love scene in this act."

They did. Jack overplayed. Sorely was Jess tempted to follow his example, the more so because Orford was not present. Jack and she had a call together after the fall of the curtain.

"All is well," said Cherrington.

But Jess refused to believe this. And she remained dismally pessimistic for the rest of the afternoon. No thrills came to her. Cherrington almost overwhelmed her with solicitude. He whirled her back to the flat in a taxi, and made her lie down for half an hour. After that there was barely time for a tiny dinner. The evening performance began at eight. Cherry walked up and down, smoking cigarettes. She saw that he was wildly excited, determined to cover up her disappointment with praise which reacted as penance.

"I was rotten," she declared.

"If you say that again I shall slap you."

"Do it! Take a stick to me. Rouse me! I'm feeling limp, a mere rag."

He prescribed instead one glass of champagne.

When they got back to the theatre, a subtle change had taken place. London, not Suburbia, was flocking into the theatre. Jess and Cherry paused for a moment at the main entrance, studying the humours of the crowd, a jolly crowd, adequately victualled—postprandial. Already pit and gallery were packed. To-night the author would be in front, sitting with Orford in his box. Cherrington left Jess in her dressing-room and rushed off to interview the business manager. He came back, full of news, as Jess was slipping into her pretty frock, a virginal affair, which no man could dare to describe.

"Old Wrest is coming."

Jess had never heard of old Wrest. Cherry explained that he was the king of critics, gey hard to please, but a power, the one man upon whom the marble of Clement Scott had fallen. And, by the luck of things, he happened to be a friend of the author. That fact, however, would not warp his judgment. He concluded jubilantly:

"We have the right house, thank the Lord!"

Jess realised this long before she went on. Jack had sent her a big bunch of Parma violets, and her tiny room was full of flowers, including a bouquet of La France roses from George. But these oblations counted as nothing in comparison with Mr. Lenox Hambrough's affirmations.

"We're in for it," he predicted. "Look at the

others. They know. This is Orford's big bid for a new lease of life. Scrap all memories of the *matinée*. We shall play for all we're worth."

"Are you worth much, Jack?"

"Haven't saved a bob. Have you?"

"No."

Jess went on. Instantly she became sensible of the difference in audiences. As swiftly, confidence, so sadly lacking at the *matinée*, came back to her. She ceased to be Jess. Her first lines established her securely as Leila. She heard the unmistakable purr of approval and thrilled. At the *matinée* the other players had seemed to be mere puppets. Now, they were flesh and blood. Telepathy held her beneath its spell, the give and take of artists. Under such happy conditions it was easy indeed to play. The great thing happened. She forgot the audience. Behind the footlights, dimly seen, undulated an ocean of faces, a vast amorphous personality, omnipotent. But Jess played just as mortals live, regardless of Omnipotence. The thoughtless Jack almost upset her at a critical moment. Stage directions ordained that Jack should whisper to Leila. At rehearsals, he had merely moved his lips. Now, wanton youth, he took advantage of the situation.

"It's a cinch, my poppet, a cinch."

An irrepressible smile challenged the attention of old Wrest. He stared at the débutante through his spectacles, giving the actress credit for the smile. Thereafter he watched her with increasing interest.

Before the second act was over, London had "accepted" Miss Jessica Yeo. The august Orford tapped at the door of her dressing-room.

"My sincerest congratulations."

"But the last act may extinguish me."

"I have been watching Wrest. We shall hear from him to-morrow. I am not worrying about my next production. In any case, you will be in it."

Zeus withdrew to Mount Olympus. Cherrington laughed.

"You will be in it; you are in it; to-morrow I shall be pointed out as Miss Jessica Yeo's husband."

After the play, the author came round. He had not till then met Jess, being absent from London. He twinkled at her humorously.

"Have you done any film work, Miss Yeo?"

"Not yet."

"You will."

"With eight performances a week here?"

"Your mornings will be free. This play is going to be filmed soon, and I want you for Leila. I can arrange that with the film people. Your smile is really priceless."

He shook hands warmly and went his way.

"Your luck staggers me," said Cherry.

"It is beginning to frighten me," said Jess.

IV.

Next morning, before breakfast, Cherrington discovered that he was Miss Jessica Yeo's husband. Wrest proclaimed the fact in the great paper for which he wrote. Cherry read aloud to his wondering wife what the king of critics said.

"Miss Yeo's performance deserves more than passing notice. All said and done, it is character

that matters on the stage and off it. The author gave us Leila. Obviously he intended her to be a charming young girl. But who can define charm? Why is Miss Yeo charming? Within five minutes of her first appearance in London this hitherto unknown actress captured the house from pit to gallery. We advise everybody who has seen the play to see it again, simply because Miss Yeo is in the cast. She has the secret of character development. How she does it, and where she acquired her artless technique, are questions which she must answer, if she can. Possibly some fairy godmother touched her to such delicate issues. We have heard too much about the 'mot d'auteur' and the 'mot de situation.' Really the 'mot d'actrice' does the trick. There is extraordinary quality in Miss Yeo's voice, a 'linked sweetness' that reminds an old playgoer enchantingly of the Oldacres. We left the theatre positively convinced that Leila would make Jack happy, because she made us happy. This is the fairy gift, the supreme grace and benediction. Indeed, diction from the smiling lips of Miss Yeo becomes benediction. Mr. Orford is to be felicitated *con amore*. Miss Yeo has come to stay . . ."

"Good old Wrest!" exclaimed Cherry. "And, mark you, he leads the chorus."

"It wasn't the first performance," observed Jess. "If he had seen that——"

"My play must be pigeon-holed."

"Good heavens! Why?"

Cherry laughed gaily.

"You don't know what you're up against. Orford will boom you. Prepare, young chick, for interviews, photographs galore, invitations innumerable, all the adjuncts of success. My time will be fully occupied in playing watchdog. Miss Jessica Yeo will be hunted—hunted, the little dear. Wrest would say: 'Vive la chasse!' It will be my privilege to keep the hounds at bay, and cart home the deer."

"This deer will want to be carted home. Surely we can do without any absurd fuss?"

"We must make the most of a fine start. You leave all that to Orford and me. Would you like to have breakfast in bed?"

"Certainly not."

Cherrington thought that she took what the gods had given rather casually, but he was far too excited to read her correctly. Her luck frightened Jess, because she knew, intuitively, that it must be paid for. One item in the bill had been just presented. Cherry fully intended to sacrifice his interests in the immediate future to hers. She became terrified because he proposed to do this gladly. Was his love greater than hers? Would she retire with him to Dartmoor, if a success relatively as big was assured? And, if she did so from a sense of duty, would she go gladly?

At breakfast, Cherrington spoke of film-work and the "featuring" of popular actresses. Jess displayed obstinacy. She intended to spend her mornings in the flat ordering aright her tiny household. Cherry had engaged a married couple to

"do" for them. The mistress of the flat assured the master that they would indeed be "done" a beautiful vandyke brown if she spent her mornings fuming. Cherrington chaffed her, but she caught a glimpse of the stockbroker's son. He said lightly:

"What would their pilferings, if they do pilfer, amount to? A few shillings a week, a fiver at the outside? And I hesitate to guess at your salary, if, as Wrest says, you have come to stay. I can run the flat. I can do the marketing."

"But, Cherry, I'm longing to do all that myself. I want to make you ever so comfy."

"I tell you that you have hit the market. How hard we can't tell yet, but in my bones I know that your stock must be boomed—boomed—boomed."

At Orford's theatre that Easter Tuesday the advance booking caused the business manager to forget that influenza was raging at home. The libraries made a big deal, believing that the comedy would now run till Christmas. Reporters clamoured for personalities. A few were invented on the spot to be contradicted later, thereby getting good advertisement twice over for nothing. *The Evening Banner* had a head-line: "Miss Yeo sails Westward Ho!"

On the Thursday morning Jess and Jack were photographed on the stage in all their scenes. Jack predicted that a "Jess" cigarette would be offered to the public before Whitsuntide.

On Sunday, Mr. and Mrs. Cherrington dined at Sloden House.

So far as Cherrington could see adulation left his wife surprisingly calm. There were no symptoms

of swelled head. And she appeared to realise, even more strongly than he did, that her luck had been phenomenal.

"I have gone up like a rocket. I may come down like the stick."

When she said this to him, he pointed out to her the practical certainty which—given reasonable health—she had achieved. For parts similar to Leila, she would be in demand for many years. Both Pell and he warned her against considering parts, likely to be offered, which exacted a technique not yet acquired. Before this warning was cold on their lips, an enterprising manager sent Jess a play to read with a part in it somewhat similar to that which established the reputation of Miss Doris Keane in "Romance." Pell was tremendously excited over this opportunity, but he entreated Jess to run no risks, to serve her apprenticeship, to feel her way. A memorable interview with Orford followed. Jess saw the great man alone, drank tea with him, and listened attentively to words of ripe wisdom.

"I want to keep you here, Miss Yeo. There is a good part for you in my next production, but it is not the 'lead.' I am well aware that you may be offered the 'lead' elsewhere, at a salary much larger than I could offer you at present. You may be able to sustain the burden and responsibility of a great part. I don't know. Nobody knows. You would find the mere physical strain overpowering. If you failed, as well you might, your advancement as an actress would be gravely imperilled. If you elect to stay here in a theatre which I am proud to

say sustains the great traditions of the stage, I shall be the first to push you on and up. That will be my interest as much as yours. Young actresses, however ambitious they may be, are ill-advised by themselves and their friends when they soar too boldly into the blue. Often the fate of Icarus is theirs."

"I remember. The sun melted the wax, and his wings fell off."

"Just so. Your wings, my dear young lady, may brave the sun with impunity when they are fully grown. Give them time to grow."

"I have been offered film work."

"You will take that offer under careful consideration. Our author has spoken to me about that. I am willing that you should play Leila for him. Other offers will follow. You will be asked to recite, to play in charity performances, and so forth. I am not only thinking of myself and this theatre when I remind you that your work here must inevitably suffer and deteriorate in quality if you overwork. Can I offer you another cup of tea?"

Jess went away much impressed, and told Cherry what had passed.

"How do you feel about it?" he asked.

"I want my wings to grow, not to fall off."

"Film work will teach you a lot and double your present salary. Also you will be doing a favour to Welfare."

Welfare was the happy name of the author. Welfare—so Cherry added—might write a play for Jess.

"But you are doing that."

He remained silent. Other activities engrossed his energies. The honeymoon was only just waning, but already bride and groom were considering the necessity of taking a large flat nearer theatreland, or a maisonette.

"I want to write a play for you," he said slowly. "But I can't work at odd moments. I never could. I have to concentrate. When we are cosily settled, I shall get on with my play." After a slight pause, noting her troubled face, he added genially: "No complaints. We can't have it both ways. For the moment you are the dominant partner, the bigger bread-winner. Fate has so ordained it. I am quite happy and content."

He kissed her, smiling away her wrinkles. With her responsive temperament she had to "play up," but a vague uneasiness possessed her. Eventually, within another fortnight, two agreements were signed: one with the film people and the other with Orford. She pledged herself to play in his next production at a generous increase in salary. The film people haggled, but Cherrington, as his wife's agent, put the screw on and secured satisfactory terms.

V

They moved out of the flat and into a small house in the Regent's Park Road, overlooking the Zoological Gardens. Cherry attended to everything because nobody else seemed to attend to anything. He had the greatest difficulty in securing workmen to redecorate the house; orders promptly accepted by tradesmen were not filled; solemn promises were

broken. And the price of furniture, carpets, curtains, china and glass almost exhausted the thirteen hundred pounds belonging to Jess. The house was taken in her name. Apart from Cherrington's goods and chattels, everything belonged to her. Cherry insisted upon this, much to his wife's distress, and despite her vehement protests. His pride outweighed her native obstinacy.

"This is a business affair, darling, not a matter of sentiment. Your tiny capital has given you a home of your own; you can earn off your own bat more than enough to keep it going. If anything happened to me, you would be free of blood-sucking solicitors."

As a compromise two wills were drawn up and signed. The husband left everything to his wife, if he predeceased her, and vice versa.

By this time, every minute of Jess's day was fully occupied. Cherry and she breakfasted at nine punctually. At ten, the District Railway took her to her film work outside London. Between this and eight performances a week were sandwiched social engagements, visits to dressmaker and photographer, and an ever-increasing correspondence. Cherrington was equally busy with household management. He scurried here and there picking up bits of old furniture at sales. He assured Jess that he was re-investing her small capital wisely. He secured many bargains. One dealer, making an inventory for insurance purposes, offered to buy "the lot" at a handsome advance.

Jess, of course, would have loved to be with him on these excursions. It was too exasperating to

reflect that her work stood like a stone wall between Cherry and herself. And it was likely to become pyramidal. For the moment, at any rate, Cherry surmounted it. His devotion to her interests touched her profoundly. On the other hand, she recognised and proclaimed him as her master in everything that soared above pounds, shillings, and pence. No man, she reflected, with his ambitions and capabilities, could be happy in a subordinate position. . . .

Finally, at the end of two months, Cherry's labour of love was finished. The house-warming took place. Jess and he began to entertain those who had entertained them. Little suppers were of frequent occurrence. Jess was assailed by misgivings that they were living too extravagantly, but Cherry paid the weekly bills and filed them away without showing them to her.

As a rule, he accompanied her, each night, to the theatre, and then played bridge at The Buskin till it was time to take her home or out to supper. After the "settling in," on *matinée* afternoons, bridge whiled away more hours. He couldn't or wouldn't get on with his play. Some of his journalistic work was accomplished perfunctorily. Up to this point, his contributions to the common purse had been only slightly less than his wife's. And so far as a nice adjustment was concerned their joint means justified joyous ends. Very soon the provincial tour of his coster comedy would end, and, as yet, no manager had promised a London production.

Welfare became a guest at the little suppers, and stayed late, long after the others had gone. Jess

liked him because he was so free from vanity and pretension, and so amusing when he talked about himself and his craft and craftsmanship. He was a big fellow, lethargic of body, curling himself up in an arm-chair, but singularly alert of mind, older than Cherry, on the sunny side of fifty. He called himself the Universal Provider, and—as has been said—could turn his clever hand to anything connected with the theatre.

"I'm an artisan not an artist. I try to give the public what it wants. I ladle out the stuff with a spoon. If my babies don't like the pap, I tempt 'em with another mixture. I've a sort of formula, like the feuilleton writers."

Cherry exclaimed :

"It makes me sick to hear you talk of pap and formulæ."

Welfare always laughed at himself and others

"Bless your innocent heart, I travelled the high road before I took to the low. Jolly near starved, too. Now I pay super-tax. Don't you want to give Mrs. Cherry a Rolls-Royce? Of course you do. I'm thinking of turning my undivided mind to filming, writing film stuff myself. There's a fortune in it. Mrs. Cherry might become a film star."

"Not I."

"What are you two out for? Fame or fortune? Give me fortune! You may want fame *and* fortune. They are the extremes that meet about once in a coon's age. Once, only once in my variegated career, I have backed the winner of a double event. Foxhall won the Cesarewitch and the Cambridgeshire. Are you a Foxhall, Cherry?"

"No, but I am fool enough to believe that the public is getting fed up with pap."

"What is your formula, Mr. Welfare?" asked Jess.

The Universal Provider puffed at his cigar, smiling ironically between the puffs.

"My formula? It's at Cherry's service, if he can use it. I begin by picking my man or woman. I look out for somebody who wants a play, and has a theatre. I ask him or her to lunch at the Ritz, and do 'em top hole. When we are mellowed by Burgundy or Madeira—there's nothing to beat old Madeira—I ask my guest what he or she wants. Most of 'em assure you solemnly that their own part doesn't matter—the play's the thing. Never believe it from 'em! If you are fool enough to send along a play, however good, without a dominating part, you will be told by Jack or Jill that he or she mustn't disappoint their dear public. You'll be saying that, Mrs. Cherry, within a year or two. To return to our giddy goats—ten to one my man or woman is tingling to play a particular part. Good! That's my cue. I start embroidering their theme. That's easy if you have imagination. I am careful to give them credit for starting the hare, although I catch it. I'm not afraid of mixing drinks or metaphors. If they don't commission the unwritten play, I submit a scenario. If that doesn't work, I rough out the play. I use it as a peg whereon to hang my actor's abilities. I keep his disabilities carefully out of sight. I never let 'em see the rough copy. Why? Because so few actors possess imagination. Then I polish, bearing three essentials in mind.

Reasonably cheap production, not too many characters, and fresh business. There you are : Go it ! ”

“ I can’t go it that way,” said Cherry. “ I hate formulæ. I believe in inspiration.”

“ Inspiration be blowed ! ” said Welfare. “ Write a winner for your wife.”

“ That idea has occurred to me.”

“ You have a sitter. First act, the ill-used maid, always turning her sweet cheek to the smiter. That, my boy, never fails—never ! Present her as a flapper. Flappers and their boys fill our theatres. They chatter about the plays. They make the old folks buy the tickets. Second act—flapper with her hair up stealing shy glances at her young man. *Leila* and *Jack*. Another sure thing ! To hit your market really hard you ought to make the flapper say the most outrageous things with a face like a virgin martyr’s. She scores off everybody. She saves every situation. You might introduce a bathroom scene, not done yet. Suspense. Will the flapper get into the bath or not ? Big punch in last act. Three hundred pound blow from the flapper—a knock-out. Tears and laughter. Five-and-twenty calls.”

“ He ought to write for the movies,” said Cherry.

“ Where and when do you write ? ” asked Jess.

Welfare, apparently, was no slave to time or place. Unlike Cherry, he worked at odd hours, in a railway train, in a club smoking-room, jotting down notes upon the backs of envelopes or on a bridge-marker. Cherry envied him this amazing facility.

“ Practice,” said Welfare. “ I began to write in an office, during an awful slump, when business was

going to blazes. To have to attend to rotten business is a fine discipline. I was interrupted fifty times a day, but I learnt to be independent of my surroundings." He glanced round him. "I dare say it's not easy to be independent of these surroundings."

The dining-room was charming: a panelled parlour with mahogany furniture. A round table, shining with elbow grease and wax, reflected the glass and silver. Welfare happened to be a bachelor; he lived at The Buskin.

"You two are enjoying the passing moment. Quite right too!"

Host and hostess remained silent.

"I must get to work soon," said Cherry.

"The sooner the better," added Jess.

Then, swearing them to secrecy, Welfare prepared them for bad news. Hot weather was killing his play. Every theatre in town was affected. Upon such matters Orford held a discreet tongue. Members of his company knew the truth when the notices went up, not before. Welfare said positively to Jess:

"Within a fortnight, you will be rehearsing your new part."

VI

As soon as Welfare had gone, Jess turned excitedly to her husband.

"If your play was finished, Mr. Orford might consider it. He is not pledged beyond this next production."

Cherry made a despairing gesture.

" I must tell you the truth, dearest."

" The truth ? How long have you hidden the truth from me ? "

" I hated to tell you. I can't get on with this play. There is no inspiration forthcoming. I started to write it about you. And I saw, or I thought I saw, you as you were . . . "

She looked at him in astonishment.

" But have I changed ? "

" Enormously. You see you have ' arrived.' And in my play you didn't arrive. Everything has gone superlatively well with you. In my play, there was tension—suspense—pathos. I suppose it comes to this ; an author does his best work when he can not only imagine things but feel them. Before we became engaged I was on edge with anxiety, keyed up to concert pitch . . . Now——"

She regarded him anxiously.

" Tell me exactly how you feel now."

" Flatly discontented with myself describes my mental condition. The physical side is more than satisfied. I can understand now that an assured income robs a man of initiative."

" But our income is not assured."

" And that's where the mental discontent comes in. I was happy enough when I was busy buying things for this house. But, to-day, I'm at a loose end. I ought to be at work, but my mind dwells on our little luncheons and suppers. All the same——"

" Yes ? "

He spoke hesitatingly :

" I have an idea for an entirely new play. It

grips me a bit. From the box-office point of view, it doesn't sound promising. And there is no part in it for you."

"As if that mattered——! Tell me all about it."

"If there was much to tell, Jess, I should be at work. I long to be at work. If I don't keep up my end of our partnership, I shall be on the rocks. My theme is the co-ordination of the old order with the new, a happier understanding after this horrible war between the privileged and unprivileged. That means a serious play, however you treat it. My coster comedy is light stuff." His eyes began to sparkle. Suddenly he rose from the supper table; he paced the room; he seemed to his wife to be speaking to himself rather than to her, weighing the goods which he desired to deliver, achieving that odd detachment which is at once the bane and the blessing of imaginative mortals, the bane inasmuch as it severs them, temporarily, from their nearest and dearest, the blessing because it exalts them high above mundane worries and considerations. He spoke tensely, with intermittences of silence. Jess listened, leaning her head on her hand:

"We are up against the greatest problem in this world, the happy adjustment of interests that appear, on the surface of things, to clash discordantly. On both sides ignorance is at the root of the common misunderstanding. Nothing practical will be accomplished till this ignorance is enlightened . . . All our politicians are thinking of party, not of the state. Rich and poor distrust them. . . . The parsons, in and out of the pulpit, drive their sheep along the old paths. . . . In the

trenches we were all comrades. . . . If that unity of endeavour could be applied to civil life, we should have a real peace. What a propaganda! Can it be published on the stage? Why not? I see two men—duke's son and cook's son—sworn friends in France, and meeting again over here at civil war with each other, bitter enemies under the tyranny of consequence and circumstance. But the old friendship triumphs. Conflicting claims are fused. But how to do it? In 'Strife' there was no solution attempted. But a solution there must be. To write another 'Strife' that might help to end strife, ah! that would be worth while . . ."

The ring went out of his voice. He continued despondently:

"Welfare would laugh at me. Orford would shake his head. Pellie would hiss like a serpent. Perhaps I am not man enough for such a task. I have not suffered. I've had an easy time, too easy . . . In the trenches——"

"You suffered then—cruelly."

"And I swore to myself that if I escaped from hell, I would turn my eyes in another direction. But I didn't. I chose the easy way. I wanted certain things. I got them. I got you. The wonder of that leaves me gasping. I ought to be the most grateful man on earth. And yet I want—I want something that eludes me, something apart from the flesh, some satisfying essence, some elixir, which perhaps I am not worthy to drink."

Jess thought swiftly: "He is drifting from me."

She went to him, and put her arms about him. As she did so she recalled vividly their walk through

the wind and the rain. She had clung to him then, the weaker, physically, of the two. She clung to him now, desperately, in a passion of tenderness, as she apprehended his weakness and her own strength. At that moment her love became selfless. To help him, she would have sacrificed her own ambitions. Such moments pass. But a peak once climbed may be climbed again. What her husband had said moved her the more deeply, because it struck an answering chord in her. She, too, desired to slake her thirst with an *elixir vitæ*, some sublimated essence of the spirit, the soul-satisfying draught of happiness and peace.

Still clinging to him, she spoke vehemently :

" You must write that play. If you don't, if you refuse to leave the easy way, I shall blame myself. You are keeping me in cotton wool. I love the warmth of it. But can I be warm, if you are cold ? Shall I tell you that I have seen this coming, this tiny cloud ? Why has this theme gripped you ? I can guess. Because you have felt that our interests conflicted. Out of that feeling grows the desire to express it. Do it ! Let yourself go ! Give the very best that is in you. As for me, your wife, I would sooner you failed in a great endeavour than succeeded in what is light and trivial. You believe that ? "

" I want to believe it, you dear woman. But failure would try me high. "

" Promise me that you will write this play ? "

" I promise you that I will try. "

CHAPTER VIII

BLUDGEONINGS

I

CHERRY began work on his new play, according to plan, humorously sensible that the Hun phrase indicated retreat. Hitherto, he had retired, so to speak, before his more notable advances in the literary field. Metaphorically speaking, he was in the habit of wrapping a wet towel round his head and "sporting his oak." Such seclusion was now, alas, denied him. He found himself interrupted twenty times in one morning. For a fortnight, he struggled desperately to rise above domestic trivialities which every woman knows are not really trivial. Incidentally he discovered the constant strain upon the nerves that housekeeping in these post-war days imposes. Jess was unable to help him, because, as Welfare had predicted, she was very busy rehearsing her new part. Accordingly, it came to pass that two young persons were seriously overworking themselves, and thereby imperilling their common comfort and peace of mind. To make matters worse, social claims became more and more insistent. Both Jess and Cherry were friends of the slightly Duchess of Sloden. Through her Jess achieved a sort of vogue amongst personages.

Pellie acclaimed this as a gilt-edged advertisement. Jess found herself constantly paragraphed by the clever lady journalists who write letters in the illustrated weekly papers. Fan, for example, wrote to Melisande :

" MELLIE MINE,—I s'pose you were 'normously bucked 'bout bein' seen walkin' with *the* Duchess (not the *naughty one*) and Miss Jessica Yeo in the park las' Sunday. You 'tended not to see me, poor lil' me in me best frock. My boy said : ' Jess is a pet.' He tells me he's matey with her, but, lord luv a duck ! I never believe *him*. A lil' bird whispers that Miss Yeo's noo frocks are frightf'ly excitin'. Deville and Dossiter. And more Deville than Dossiter—! But Jess, so m' lil' songster itters, is an angel girlic and madly in luv wiv' her nubby."

Cherry cursed roundly when he read these personalities, but Jess was mildly amused.

" Aren't we to get all the fun we can out of ourselves ? " she asked.

Alone, he had to admit that Jess had the livelier sense of humour and, physically, she seemed the stronger. Hard work agreed with her. Cherry had never flinched from hard work in his celibate days, because he had loved his work. He wanted to work now harder than ever, because his fees from the coster comedy were at an end. In a fury of energy, he interviewed every London manager, discovering to his mortification that they were more interested in his wife than himself. All of them listened politely to his reading of the play, and admitted

frankly that the provincial returns justified a London production. Blandly they promised to "consider" it later on. Meanwhile had Mr. Cherrington anything new—something with a leading part for Miss Jessica Yeo? Mr. Cherrington said ruefully to his wife:

"It comes to this, Jess. You're the only pebble on my beach."

"What nonsense!"

"A stone cold fact, a frozen conviction. I'm ice-bound."

The common sense, inherited from her sire, made Jess observe:

"Your innings will come, dearest. Let me score for a bit. Why should you try to score when I'm in?"

"Am I to wait till you're out?"

"My wonderful luck will turn."

"With all my heart I hope not. And why should it? Welfare is right. I ought to be writing something for you, but—damn it!—I can't. I have the paralysing, back-breaking conviction that if I tackled that job it would be done with my tongue in my cheek, and the public would find me out. The sort of muck that goes down is, in its way, sincere. I mean the writers are sincere. I know two famous novelists of the better sort who contemplated collaboration over a novel. A big publisher solemnly agreed to publish it under some girl's name. These fellows deliberately intended to pull the leg of the British public. They proposed to write down to the level of the million, to boom their stuff, to start controversy, to play the giddy goat

all round the world. But, with brains and wide experience behind 'em, they couldn't keep it up. They hadn't sincerity."

"I understand."

"Welfare will write a play for you."

"With his tongue in his cheek?"

"No. Welfare, in his way, is sincere. He likes to give the public what it wants. That's his *métier*. And his stuff is really good. I told him yesterday to go ahead."

"You must go ahead with your play."

"When?—and where?—and how?"

Ultimately he tried writing at night, and roughed out a first act which he read aloud to Jess. But if he was hoping for inspiration from her, she failed to supply it. The critical faculty is rare. It blooms, often, in otherwise arid pastures. Men and women, blessed or cursed with vivid imaginations, seldom possess it. Criticism, to be true and valuable, exacts wide knowledge of human nature, and a thorough apprehension of technique. A critic, moreover, must possess the sense of detachment, the power of standing aloof from personal prejudice and predilections.

Meanwhile the new production was launched. Hot weather, admittedly, kept Londoners out of theatres, but Orford professed himself satisfied. Jess achieved another triumph in an easy part. Orford sent for Cherrington a week later.

"Didn't you tell me that you were writing a comedy for your wife?"

Cherry had to confess that he was groaning and travailing over something else. Orford asked no questions. Obviously, his mind was full of Jess.

"If the right play came to me, I should give her the lead. I am delighted with her progress. She ascends gracefully into the blue. That is as it should be. Strictly between ourselves," Cherry bowed, "I have no great faith in my new venture, because it's not new enough. I have two plays which I'm considering seriously. My main objection to both is that they contain no suitable part for Miss Yeo. I should like to give her a big chance. And if your play held that, I should consider it with very lively interest. Surely you see my point?"

Cherrington answered with slight irritation:

"I feel it even more than I see it, Mr. Orford."

"Then give me, if you can, some idea of what you contemplated. You might be induced to shelve this new play, and go back to the other."

Thus encouraged, Cherrington attempted the task most uncongenial to a dramatist: the exhibition of raw material not made up. But, greatly to his surprise, Orford showed enthusiasm.

"You are on the right lines."

"No; I am side-tracked. I suppose the explanation is simple enough. I can't use my wife as a lay figure. I shrink from exhibiting her. I find my imagination palsied. And then, if I know myself, I should fall back upon facts, attempting a genuine portrait."

"That is what is wanted. What gets laughs in the theatre? Not, not the witty epigrams, however cunningly composed, but the humorous touches which we all recognise instantly, the laughter-provoking quips of everyday life."

Cherrington admitted this, adding pleasantly:

" If you would listen to my new play—— ? "

" With pleasure."

Thus encouraged, Cherry attacked a more congenial theme with vigour. And he could see that Orford was interested. Instantly, he responded, speaking fluently, conscious of increased power, sweeping on and on to an inevitable climax. When he finished, Orford applauded :

" When this play is written and polished, you must read it to me, but, I tell you frankly, in my opinion you fly too high. If you can carry our playgoers with you, all is well, but they are earthy, my dear fellow, very earthy. However, God forbid that I should clip your wings."

With this, Cherrington went his way. Jess happened to be engaged, so he lunched at The Buskin, and found himself seated next to Wrest, who said pleasant things about Miss Yeo. In the lounge afterwards, they smoked cigars together, and Wrest, after admitting that he preferred rose-growing to criticism, was beguiled into talking shop. Cherrington told him of his interview with Orford. Wrest chuckled cynically :

" Orford has sound judgment. Apparently, your path leads away from the box-office. Mark you, I say 'apparently.' All the same, it's my honest conviction that youth should be adventurous. Go for the big thing, for the seemingly unattainable, if—if you have pluck and endurance. Facile success falls like dew upon clever fellows. Welfare, by the way, was drinking champagne at luncheon. I like Welfare. And his work amuses me, the more so because it imposes no strain upon my intelligence.

But the question for you to decide, what you alone can decide, is whether or not such success as Welfare has achieved will satisfy you."

II

Meanwhile, the smile of home became derisive. Writing at night is cumulatively exhausting. Cherry had never suffered from insomnia. But now, with brains over-stimulated, sleep came to him *pede claudo*. And he woke in the morning unrefreshed, dismally sensible that matutinal energies must be wasted upon servants and tradesmen. At luncheons and suppers his hosts or his guests expected from him a certain ebullition. In his own house or out of it he had to entertain others, do his "bit," although he might be aching with fatigue. Success imposed the unshrinkable penalty. Before marriage, he had carried a note-book in which he jotted down happy thoughts, anything and everything that appealed to his humour. Now, as housekeeper, he found himself cocking an eager ear for culinary tips, scribbling down recipes and addresses. The Duchess of Sloden talked to him about "chiffons." She helped him to "run his show." And it was a show, an exhibition of "how to do it" in the interests of a rising star. Jess, of course, had to be "spared." That was part of her luck. No "sparkle" was demanded of her off the stage. She wore her pretty frocks; she smiled, sunning herself in the smiles of others; she went up the social ladder hand over hand. The Yeo family were tremendously impressed. Mr. and Mrs. Yeo blinked at this dazzling

daughter when they came to London to stay with her. Miss Jessica Yeo's husband and father and mother shared the uncomfortable conviction that they were rather out of it. Incidentally, Mrs. Yeo developed maternal affection and solicitude for her son-in-law. She guessed that all was not well with him. Towards the close of their visit, she said to Mr. Yeo :

" Does Jess see what is going on under her nose ? "

" Be more explicit, my dear Clarice."

" I am thinking of poor Arthur. Isn't he burning the candle at both ends ? He works at night. And he runs this house—admirably, we must admit."

" I admit nothing," replied Mr. Yeo testily.

" This house appears to me to be run extravagantly. These young people ought to be saving, not spending."

" I ventured to say as much to Arthur, but he assured me that nowadays ' splash ' was expected. Sir Egerton Pell hinted that lobsters and oysters were part of the scheme."

" What scheme ? "

" The booming of Jess, of course."

Mr. Yeo groaned, and then shrugged his massive shoulders, as he muttered :

" All this is not the right thing, Clarice, but we are helplessly out of date."

Mrs. Yeo said solemnly :

" I have urged upon Arthur the expediency of engaging a cook-housekeeper, who would relieve him of household cares, but his present cook is a treasure. I will spare you the shock of telling you what he pays her."

Some two months before this, Cherry had discharged the married couple who were feathering their own nest indefatigably. His present cook had been kitchenmaid to the Duchess of Sloden. To replace her with an elderly cook-housekeeper might offend a kind adviser and helper. The Duchess, truly democratic in all things unconnected with land, often popped into the kitchen, and heartened up her old servant. She presided over chafing-dish suppers with a skill that would have evoked commendation from Philippe Egalité. She said to Cherry :

"If you don't go it, you're gone."

Cherry, not being a fool, knew well enough that Jess and he were trotting out of their class, but he hadn't the heart to refuse the invitations of personages, although there was no tincture of the snob in him or his wife. Junketing tired him horribly, and a young husband's vanity and pride prevented him from acknowledging this.

"I'm fed up," he thought, "but Jess isn't."

And he remembered that she had never "come out" during the years that the locust, war, had eaten. She was having the "good time" of which she had been robbed as a spinster.

He finished the second act of his play. By this time acquaintance with Wrest had ripened into friendship. Wrest read the two acts and pronounced them good. He never indulged in superlatives. He said confidently :

"If you can keep this up, you're all right, my boy. You have plunged at once into your crisis, without bothering and tiresome retrospection. But,

undeniably, you have stolen thunder from your unwritten third act. To whom are you sending this play when it's done? "

At the mention of Orford's name, Wrest shook his hoary head.

"He hasn't the pluck to do it. I believe I know your man."

He mentioned one of the new managers, who had made much money out of a farce. But, apparently, Mr. Godfrey Ambrose was catholic in his tastes, and something of a "highbrow." Wrest whispered to Cherry that Ambrose had secured, as leading man, the finest emotional actor in the kingdom.

"Finish your play," counselled Wrest, "with him in your eye. I happen to know that Ambrose wants something out of the ordinary, and he is short of the right stuff. I shall mention you to him."

"You are most awfully kind."

"Get on with Act III."

III

But he couldn't.

There is no such tragedy as this in the life of a man of letters. To reach a definite point, to be in sight of shore, and then to find oneself stranded upon the reefs of indecision and impotence. The butter doesn't "come" because the temperature is wrong. Cherry realised that his imaginative powers were chilled. What he wrote, under pressure, had to be scrapped. It wasn't "right." Hard work, unremitting quill-driving, couldn't make it right. For a

time he dissembled with Jess. This imposed a further strain upon his diminishing energies, provoking dyspepsia and irritability. One night, after a supper party, he overheard a duologue between two gilded youths.

"Why did Jess marry this chap Cherrington?"

"Ask another, old bean. I'm told he carried her bag on tour."

"He's a dull dog."

Cherrington slipped away. Was he becoming a dull dog? He felt no rancour whatever against his accuser, merely curious to discover whether or not the scathing indictment were true. Did Jess find him dull? Dealing faithfully with this insistent question, others rose up like the teeth of Cadmus. How much time was spent with his wife? Were they happy together? Was the marriage a success? Was it a real and lasting partnership? What was each getting out of it?

He lay awake that night for many hours. Jess slept placidly in the twin bed beside his. He switched on the softly shaded light and stared at her hungrily. Was she really his? If he died, would she suffer horribly? Would she miss him? Would she marry again?

He came slowly to the conclusion that she was happy independently of him. Success had made her so. Her obsession for the stage, for the counterfeit presentment of life, sufficed her. *Per contra*, want of success had made him miserable—a dull dog. A less honest, or a less clever man might have fenced with the truth, or evaded it. But Cherrington, by mere force of habit, had become

analytical. And from boyhood he had exercised excellent powers of observation. Gazing at Jess, he picked up straw after straw which indicated the course of a current flowing steadily from him. Jess had made many friends; she was becoming dependent upon them; she accepted gladly invitations to houses where her husband was bored to tears; and—weightiest straw of all—she was affected by the temper of her audiences. A cold house chilled her to the bone.

Cherry switched off the light and closed his eyes. Ought he to blame himself or her for this drifting apart? A crueller thought assailed him. Had he inspired real love in her—selfless love? Had he inspired passion? Always she was sweet to him, but that was her characteristic. She was sweet to everybody. That alone assured her popularity. Pellie affirmed that her smile was worth fifty pounds a week. Very soon it would fetch that—on the screen! She had humour, an alert intelligence. . . .

With a natural revulsion of good feeling, he realised that he was appraising his wife, summing up her "points," actually looking for—blemishes! Acutely miserable, he focused attention on himself. Why was he going to bits? Could he stop this disintegrating process? Could he shake himself free of tormenting thoughts? Ought he to consult some mind specialist?

Next day at breakfast, Jess noticed his heavy eyes and increasing pallor. He said curtly that he had not slept well.

"You will work late at night——!"

"When am I to work? My mornings are fully occupied, I can assure you."

"Let me do the housekeeping."

"You can't chuck your film work. You are the bread-winner."

He was careful to keep bitterness out of his voice, but poignantly sensible that he had to play a part, that he dared not be entirely frank. Also, he was contemplating compromise.

"If you worked in the afternoon, dearest."

"But I have to play about with you."

"You don't have to."

This was the opening he sought for. Very tentatively he moved a pawn:

"I have an idea."

"For your third act?"

"Indirectly, it affects my third act. Miss Oldacre is in London. I saw her two days ago. She will do no work for a couple of months. You are very fond of her, Jess."

"Fond of her! Who isn't?"

"She has taken rooms in rather a mean street."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

"And the darling loves comfort. And she is so clever. I am sure she could run this house admirably, if—if I left it."

"If you left it——? Cherry—what do you mean? What are you driving at?"

"I am not driving at anything; I am being driven—down hill. Last night I hardly slept a wink, because I was thinking things out. For both our sakes, I must pull myself together. And if that involves wrenching myself from you, what do you say?"

For a moment Jess was incapable of speech. She realised instantly that she had been living in a fool's paradise. One sentence thrust her out of it. A weaker woman would have burst into tears which, possibly, might have melted Cherry's resolution. Perhaps she was too astounded to weep. And immediately the feminine instinct of ministration forced her to consider him first. A self-accounting must be postponed.

"You want to leave me?" she faltered.

He replied gravely.

"I want to do the wise thing."

"Away from me?"

"Away from London. If I could take you with me——! But that is impossible. You have your engagements. And I have mine. Your engagements are with your public; mine are with myself. I am horribly dissatisfied with myself. For a couple of months I have been drifting like a log upon your stream. Log is good. A log drifting down the wrong stream is useless. It may end in damming that stream. Directed aright, it reaches its destination—the saw-mill; it ceases to be a log; it accomplishes its destiny."

"I am doing my best to follow you."

"I propose this as an experiment. As an experiment I have tried it before. I have rushed away from London into the wilds of Wales and found what I wanted. If Miss Oldacre can take care of you for a couple of months I shall go to Dartmoor."

"If you feel like that," said Jess, "I—I urge you to go."

It would be idle to speculate on what might have happened if Jess had not been summoned at this moment to the telephone. At the other end was a busy man, the manager of the film factory. Little did he guess that Jess was tempted to cancel her engagement with the firm there and then. To add to her distress, the manager kept her several minutes, giving instructions which she had to write down on paper. Whilst she was doing this, she heard the front door slam. Cherry, evidently, not within reach of Dartmoor, had rushed into Regent's Park. He left a pencilled note behind him.

"DARLING JESS," he wrote,— "If I have upset you, forgive me. I am terribly upset myself. I shall cool myself down for an hour, and so will you. Bear this in mind: circumstances which we two can't control are driving us apart, for a short time only.

"Always your loving,

"CHERRY."

There are moments—critical moments—in the lives of many women when the exercise of the reasoning faculty becomes a disability. Ladies, who may deny this, are probably exceptions to the rule. Jess, for instance, left alone, confronted with a heart-breaking emergency, began to reason with herself. Had the manager of the film factory telephoned a few minutes later, it is likely that Jess would have acted first and thought about it afterwards; she would have obeyed the emotional, intuitional driving-power that the practice of her profession had developed. She wanted to fling

herself into Cherry's arms, to comfort and console him, because she perceived that he was wretched and forlorn.

Instead, she went to her work before Cherry returned from the park.

And she had leisure to reflect upon an abominable situation. Appetite for such reflection increased as she chewed, so to speak, the cud of introspection. Being quite as honest as her husband, with courage equal to his if not greater inasmuch as, physically, she was the stronger, Jess faced the truth valiantly.

Cherry wanted to leave her.

From this point she reasoned logically; but, unhappily, her reasoning was built upon the wrong premiss. Cherry wanted to leave an untenable position. In justice to Jess, it must be pointed out that a wrong premiss, under the circumstances, was almost unavoidable, because, in one sense, Cherry did want to leave Miss Jessica Yeo, but not Mrs. Cherrington. A woman with wider experience would have differentiated the two personalities. At the moment Jess was incapable of doing this. The hypercritical, at ease in their arm-chairs, may contend, further, that Jess ought to have seen, as her mother had seen, what was going on under her pretty nose. But here we must blame Cherrington, however lightly, because the good fellow had suppressed his feelings till they reached breaking point. Altruism generally breeds selfishness in the too preciously guarded object. Bear in mind, too, that hard work exacted from a very young woman almost undivided energies and attention.

If Cherry wanted to leave her, he must go. To

this mast she nailed her flag, the flag of independence. She knew that her friends, Miss Oldacre, the Duchess, and the many women of the world with whom, of late, she had become intimate, would applaud this resolution. She could hear the sprightly tones of the Duchess :

" My dear, if a man wants rope, give it to him. If he hangs himself, that is his affair."

Being perfectly healthy and therefore optimistic, Jess decided that the two months on Dartmoor would rehabilitate Cherry. He had upset himself ; he must pick himself up. Inability to write was the tap root of the trouble, and if he had suffered from this before, and knew the right remedy, he was wise to apply it. He would come back to her, joyfully, when his play was finished to his satisfaction.

None the less, the stark truth shocked her. What he accounted to be his finest work could only be accomplished away from her.

Having reached this conclusion, as a wife, she began to survey the prospect from the professional point of view. What did his work mean to Cherry ? Was it a greater thing than his love for her ? The corollary presented itself. What did her work mean to her and him ? It meant, materially speaking, an income : it meant a delightful home, many friends, a measure of fame. To throw this to the winds would be an unconsidered act of folly. Loving her work, she could measure his love for work. What she could not measure, what eluded her persistently, was his love for her and her love for him. Since marriage, she had taken both for granted. What had made her happy ? Success as an actress,

or Cherry's never-failing solicitude? The answer to that must be left in abeyance. Clearly her love for Cherry had not counter-balanced a temporary inability to write.

They would meet at luncheon, alone. Possibly, quite probably, the cooling process of reflection might crystallize into common sense. Cherry, if he chose, could remain with her and cut loose from all distractions. Let him shut himself up in his own room, and lock the door against interruption. Somebody could be paid to relieve him of household duties and worries. She hoped that it might be so.

IV

Cherry, however, failed to cool himself in Regent's Park, where the Furies harried him with beak and talons.

He watched the children sailing toy boats upon the pond, reflecting that Jess and he had embarked as lightly upon a summer sea, beneath stainless skies. Chill October had come, but the children were pushing off their tiny craft from the shore regardless of a rising wind and a falling glass. He watched, too, the derelicts of the great city stranded upon the grass, huddled up on the benches, foul blots upon a fair landscape aglow with autumnal tints. Beyond lay the Zoological Gardens, where great beasts paced up and down their narrow cages.

A wretched waif slunk up and asked for a few coppers to buy food. Obviously, he wanted drink. The dire craving for raw spirits glistened in eyes, on nose, and about his loose red lips.

" I'm an old soldier, sir."

" A soldier of Fortune ? "

" A soldier of Misfortune."

From his accent, Cherry guessed that this scarecrow had been a gentleman. With half a crown he despatched him, hot foot, to seek oblivion. When a lean claw closed over the piece of silver, the soldier of Misfortune said hoarsely :

" I wish you luck, sir."

" Wish me pluck," replied Cherry.

He left the pond, and started to walk round the park. Jess was willing that he should leave her. Somehow, he had expected anything save calm acquiescence. If she had hurled herself into his arms, burst into tears, entreated him to stay, he might have reconsidered a too hasty determination to bolt. He tried to be fair to her. A surprise had been sprung on her, which might well cause mental and physical paralysis.

But—if she had loved him as he loved her ?

To exorcise this devil in rampant possession he contemplated another act of altruism. First and last, he must consider Jess. If he secured Miss Oldacre, he could leave his wife knowing that her comfort, at least, would be assured. An hour's walking would take him to Miss Oldacre's lodgings. At such an hour he would find her at home.

Leaving the park, he threaded swiftly the crowded streets between Gloucester Gate and Pimlico. As a rule the humours of the crowd tickled his fancy. To-day, he noted their ill-humours, the stolid faces, the apathetic gaits, the sullen indifference of the majority. London seemed to be horribly full of

ugly people. When he reached Piccadilly Circus, he found a queue of impatient foot-passengers, awaiting the uplifted hand of a stout constable. A woman in front of him turned and glared at him.

"Who are you a-pushing?" she asked.

Cherry lifted his hat as he replied suavely:

"I am pushing you, madam, and the stout gentleman behind is pushing me, and somebody else, no doubt, is pushing him."

He crossed the thoroughfare, and stood still. Feeling tired, he decided to take a 'bus as far as Victoria Station. He joined another queue, mostly women. When the right 'bus rolled up there was another scramble. An angular female pushed Cherry aside.

"If you appeal to violence, madam, I surrender."

"No more room," shouted the conductor.

Cherry walked on, disgusted with London, and quite understanding why Timon hated Athens. At any moment it might rain, and he carried a stick in his hand instead of an umbrella. Passing the theatres, he had been reminded disagreeably of his coster comedy which would now be running in the West End, if there were more playhouses. Another dozen, at least, ought to be built. How damnable that stuff should become shop-soiled and moth-eaten merely because the goods couldn't be exhibited.

In this unhappy frame of mind, Cherry reached his destination, a by-street out of St. George's Road. Looking for the right number, he stared at houses all exactly alike, grey and grim survivals of the earlier period of the nineteenth century. This, he

supposed, was the place where everybody's great-grandfather—if they possessed one—had shot snipe. Obviously, the ducal owner had left this street as a notable example of how not to rebuild it.

Miss Oldacre was at home.

Cherry soon discovered, much to his satisfaction, that this wasn't the dear lady's home. She had let her flat in Battersea for the few months when she was on tour. The tour had ended earlier than she had expected. Graciousness and serenity triumphed over red velvet and antimacassars; it soared above stuffed tropical birds and a body Brussels carpet; it warmed a room whose actual temperature remained obstinately at fifty-four degrees Fahrenheit.

"And how is my author?"

"Slumping."

He laughed. This was a tremendous tribute to Nan Oldacre, but as yet she couldn't measure it.

"I laugh," explained Cherry, "because I want to cry. Perhaps I shall. Niobe couldn't spoil this carpet, could she?"

"That," replied Miss Oldacre, "is where the blessed doctrine of compensation smiles on me. I shall wallow in my flat after this. To appreciate home, one must leave it."

"I am leaving mine."

"Cherry——!"

He told his tale none too well, thereby impressing his kind listener the more. When he had finished he was distressed to note a grievous change. She sat before him a sad, old woman. Youth, the amazing attribute of the Oldacres, seemed to have forsaken her. Her first words were quavering.

"And you brought me roses!"

Passing Victoria Station, Cherry had stopped at a florist's to buy a big bunch of Maréchal Niel roses.

"Perhaps I wanted to bribe you."

"No; it wasn't that. With your own troubles heavy on you, you thought of an old woman in shabby lodgings. I am more touched than I can say. It makes me miserable to think of you and little Jess unhappy. I was looking forward to seeing you together—in your home. As for me, I'll do what I can. It will be a pleasure, not a bother, to keep things going smoothly whilst you are away, but, my dear friend, must you go?"

"She urges me to go."

"Ah! Some of us women say the wrong thing when we feel the right. Perhaps you ought to go. I love London, but I have hated it, longed to escape from the turmoil, the dirt, the smells, the unsmiling rows of houses."

"That is how I am feeling exactly."

She remained silent. Slowly the look of youth returned. Her voice recovered its soft inflections.

"I said once to Jess, when that jolly boy, George, was courting her in his robust way, that a clever woman ought not to marry a clever man. Jess is clever. How clever I can't say. Speaking professionally, I am not yet able to measure her. We have not seen her in a big part. Success may have spoiled her a little."

"No; she is just the same. No blame rests on her. My vanity, I suppose, has brought me to this impasse. Her success has spoiled me. I want to make good, I must make good—on my own. If

she were foot-loose, if she could come away with me, out of this hurly-burly, I should find myself again. That is impossible."

"The pity of it!" murmured Miss Oldacre. After a long pause she spoke again, hesitatingly: "Is it wise to leave such an attractive creature? I can't advise you about that. I feel instinctively that she needs you, perhaps more than she knows."

"I wish to God I could think so. But—here's the rub—dare I accuse her of being wrapped up in her work? If I had an independent income—I! I can't stick being supported by her."

Miss Oldacre spoke at last with decision.

"I understand your position, you must work out your own salvation in your own way. I'll mother Jess."

He kissed her hand very gratefully.

"What a woman you are! What an uplifter!"

Jess and he met at luncheon, but, unhappily, a maidservant was present. Jess hurried into the dining-room, looking—so her husband thought—rosily prosperous. Inasmuch as she had walked faster than usual, with a north-easter smacking her cheeks, high colour was not surprising. When the maid left the room, the certainty of her speedy return wired down effervescing sensibilities. And, somehow, a fried sole, followed by a leg of mutton, served as a soporific rather than an excitant. When coffee was brought, husband and wife were ludicrously conscious that anything approximating to domestic drama was impossible. Nevertheless, what the French call *la scène obligatoire* had to be played.

"I have seen Miss Oldacre," said Cherry, as he

lit a cigarette. "She will come here and make you ever so comfy."

Jess thought: "It is cut and dried."

"I shall love to have her. I have tried to see things with your eyes. I accept this as an experiment in—in partnership. You are going to Dartmoor on business connected with the firm. The sooner you go, the sooner you will return."

She said this with an odd air, as if she were rehearsing new lines. As a matter of fact they had not been rehearsed. They came suddenly into her head. Cherry nodded, puffing at his cigarette. Inwardly, he was fuming, growling to himself: "She doesn't care a damn." To make sure of this, he said lightly:

"I could go this afternoon."

"Why not?"

"Exactly. Why not?"

Clever people continually play the fool with happiness in this cut-throat fashion. If they held their tongues, peace would re-establish itself. Jess got up from the table.

"I must see about getting your things ready."

At the door she paused.

"You will find it bitterly cold on Dartmoor."

"It is bitterly cold here."

She went out. Each was playing a part. Each had decided that there must be no vulgar quarrel, no vituperation. Deliberately, they chose to ignore life, forgetting that life would not ignore them. The unhappy Cherry fortified himself with a glass of old brandy.

"Fifty below zero," he muttered.

V

He travelled as far as Exeter that day. Jess saw him off at Waterloo. At the last moment, some ice about their hearts melted. When Jess held up her face to be kissed, Cherry gripped her. Instantly, she clung to him. A porter was grinning, but they didn't care.

"This is beastly," said Cherry, "but it seems the only way."

"Yes, yes; you'll take care of yourself?"

He laughed oddly.

"I shall *now*. Jess, I hate to think that this is my fault, but you don't want half a man, do you? I shall come back—whole."

"Tickets, please."

He leaned out of the window, as the train began to move, smiling at his wife. She stood still, smiling faintly back, a dainty figure in her furs, alone amongst the crowd. That was the impression he carried with him as he sank back in his seat: he was leaving her alone.

Jess returned to her house and her work. Miss Oldacre would come to her on the morrow. Meanwhile she would have time to think. Cherry's almost indecent haste to escape perplexed her. She apprehended vaguely that she had been cold. Under warming pressure he would have lingered at least another twenty-four hours. Why had she been cold? She hated herself, recognising at last inherited defects. Her father had often appeared to her to be cold, aloof, difficult to understand. But, during his visit, when they met for the first

time upon more equal terms, she had caught him looking at her with unmistakable love and solicitude in his keen old eyes. Possibly, all his long life he had suppressed feeling, said nothing when something was expected, "bottled" himself up. She had bottled herself up. That was it. Groping here and there in the dark, probing her heart, wincing from the pain of it, she admitted reluctantly the essential fact; her absorption in her work, in herself, had blinded her. A great shock had made her mute. Had she been more prepared, she might have behaved differently.

Next day, a telegram from Cherry apprised her of his arrival at Chagford. It ended: "Feel better already. Don't worry." Miss Oldacre arrived at tea-time. That sagacious lady had adopted a plan of campaign. She intended to "mother" Jess during the husband's absence, and to distract her as much as possible. She believed in the doctrine of work. Let Jess work. Let Cherry work. Ultimately they would come together again none the worse for a brief dissolution of partnership. To accept the inevitable with smiling resignation was part of her philosophy of life. She was prepared, however, for tears and explanations. Jess, greatly to her relief, neither wept nor explained. She said calmly:

"Dear Cherry had to go. I must make him think that he has done the wise thing. Then he will finish his play."

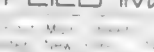
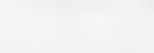
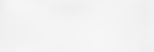
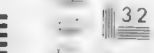
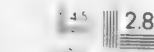
"You are a clever little woman."

She might have added: "And something of a mystery."



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That thought occurred to her later when she tried to determine whether or not Jess's attitude was assumed. Had the stage become such an obsession that acting was now second nature to her?

She accompanied Jess to the theatre, and witnessed her performance in the new play.

"You have come on," she said afterwards, "but I am not quite satisfied. Will you go over your part with me?"

"Of course. How sweet of you! I acted better in Mr. Welfare's comedy. Mr. Welfare is writing a play for me."

This had been settled some time before between Cherry and Welfare, with no conditions imposed. Welfare asked for a free hand. He said frankly:

"I'm a rapid worker, and one of the new men has asked me for a play. I never talk about my work or show it till it's done. I have Jess in my eye. But it's not my job to engage her definitely."

"That's quite all right," Cherry hastened to assure him. "Jess might not be able to leave Orford."

"Just so."

Accordingly, Jess was unable to tell Miss Oldacre anything about Welfare's play. Welfare said that he was "banging away" at it. He hoped to submit the script to the manager—whose name must not be mentioned—in a few weeks. To all this Miss Oldacre listened attentively, wondering how far Jess could go. The fact that she had soared so high, might excite astonishment; it could not be regarded as positive assurance of her becoming a star of the first magnitude.

Cherry wrote his first letter from Chagford.

"DARLING LITTLE JESS,—I have found rooms in this delightful village. The place is full of comfortable lodging-houses, not so comfortable, I suspect, in summertime. What I believe is called 'a decayed gentlewoman' is attending to my wants, which include large quantities of Devonshire cream. Little Mary is 'swelling visibly.' I climbed up to the moor yesterday, gorgeously panoramic, immensely spacious, and surveyed several rather disappointing tors whose names I forget. Last night I slept like a dormouse, and awoke a different being. I mean to win back sound health before I tackle my third act. For the moment I'm soaking myself in fresh air and atmosphere. I met an aggressively robust male wearing, apparently, his pyjamas (six degrees of frost this morning!), and he told me, chortling, that he nearly died in London six months ago. Both his lungs are healing. Bravo, Mother Nature! I shall play babe at her breast.

"I'm a bit hung up, Jess, chewing the end of my pen, and wondering what to say to you. Can't we put from us the memory of that hateful day? Scrap it? I bust, like the chameleon, when the poor little beastie was placed upon a Scotch tartan. *You didn't bust.* I sprung a disconcerting surprise on you. Forgive me! When I'm fit again I'll lie down and let you wipe your shoes on me. I feel in my bones that my luck is turning. I shall make good, as you have, bless you!

"Your faithful,

"CHERRY."

Jess read this epistle with bitter-sweet reflections. It resurrected the old, light-hearted Cherry of Manchester days. He had often told her that he was the slave of his environment. He had been, for example, unable to work at The Laurels. It gladdened her to think that he would make good at Chagford. But, to achieve this, and he would achieve it, he had been forced to leave his wife and his home. Did he miss her? And if so, why hadn't he said so? The suspicion rankled that he was rejoicing in his freedom, and too honest to pretend with her. She was tempted to show this letter to Miss Oldacre, and with it her heart. Pride prevented such an exposition. But she touched the fringe of it impersonally:

"Do you think that work comes first?" she asked. She had led up to this question skilfully, drawing from her old friend details of her earlier life.

Miss Oldacre considered the question, pensively.

"I really believe," she replied, "that our work, whatever it may be, is intended to come first. I mean that we are here to accomplish something. That something may be scrubbing boards or walking them. The main thing is to find the right work and do it, whatever it may be, to the best of our abilities."

"Yes."

No more was said at the time.

VI

Shortly after Cherry's departure, in the middle of a *matinée*, Mr. Pumford presented himself at the

door of Jess's tiny dressing-room, and was not denied admittance.

"I'm seeing the show," he said. "You're fine—fine. I was right to pay you that salary, hay?"

"You paid it under protest, Mr. Pumford."

"Did I? So I did. And now you're earning a longer screw. My heartiest congrats. Well, I popped in to tell you that I've signed on with Mr. Godfrey Ambrose. He's a winner, too."

Jess smiled at him.

"I'm sure he's lucky to get you."

"Thanks. No false modesty about me. He *is* lucky. Now, look here, Miss Yeo, I've told Mr. Ambrose to watch you."

Jess laughed.

"Really? Does he do what you tell him?"

"He's interested. I can't say more. Mum's the word, you understand?"

"Quite."

"If he should send for you, don't dilly-dally. A hustler knows what he wants, and goes for it. Just between me and you, he's the coming manager—*young*, full o' ginger, and lots o' money behind him. You ain't tied up here?"

"Not yet."

"Good."

He hustled away, waving his pudgy hand.

Within a day or two another old friend appeared after the evening performance. George Apperton escorted Jess back to the house in Regent's Park Road, and stayed to supper.

He behaved—so Jess thought—admirably, re-instating himself as the "pal," and bringing a

breeziness and jollity very welcome in November. He made love to Miss Oldacre, and admired everything in the house. Jess told him that her husband had bought all the furniture and given whole-souled energies to the scheme of decoration.

"Good old Cherry! Where is he?"

Jess replied calmly:

"He is writing a play on Dartmoor."

George stared at the cosy dining-room, thinking of Cherry's book-lined room upstairs.

"But why can't he write his play at home?"

"Simply because he can't."

"I suppose you are going to appear in it—on the lead?"

"No."

George was stupefied into silence from which he emerged presently with the air of one who has taken a plunge. A profound remark escaped his lips:

"This world is full of rummy people."

Miss Oldacre, who dealt with platitudes faithfully—always returning a Roland for an Oliver, observed gravely:

"How empty it would be without them."

CHAPTER IX

MARKING TIME

I

CHERRY waited a week before he set pen to paper, a notable abstention for such a man, because within twenty-four hours he knew that his imagination was at work again. The weather happened to be bitterly cold; a north-east wind roared over Dartmoor. Cherry was tempted to sit by the fire in his little sitting-room, smoke many pipes, and jot down his thoughts as they flew in and out of his mind. Fortunately, he had sense enough to realise that the snake insomnia, was merely scotched, not killed. To kill it, he must walk fast and far each day, braving the blast. Then he would return tired but hungry, and sleep soundly after a full meal. The will to put from him perplexing and irritating reflections concerning Jess and himself seemed to increase as he exercised it. The mere fact that he could, once more, master himself filled him with boyish glee. In this spirit he had attacked examination papers long ago, coming, in racing parlance, "fit" to the post. To get fit now engrossed him. In London he had smoked too much, drunk more wine than was wise, pampered the flesh. At Chagford he went into training, well aware that a supreme effort lay ahead of him.

At the end of the first week, he tried an experiment. After breakfast he re-read what he had written of the third act, and burnt it. He glanced affectionately at a new notebook, stuffing it into his breast pocket and patting it.

"May the right stuff go into you," he prayed.

His landlady brought him two neat packages—sandwiches and cake. She eyed her lodger complacently.

"I never saw such a change in anyone," she declared.

Cherry laughed.

"I feel like an ox just before he's turned into Bovril. Yes ; to-day, we shall extract vital juices."

"You aren't going to write on the moor ?"

"Balzac used to write in a wood in all weathers. I shall try the lew side of a tor. I feel elemental, primitive. I have made my sacrifices to the god of Fire. Now for earth and air and water."

"You'll find all three to-day."

He did.

Breasting the long hill up to the moor, earth was firm beneath his feet ; the cold air quickened his pulses ; the rain seemed to wash from him the soot of London. He was cleansed in all his tissues. For an hour at least, he pushed on, following the twisting road, seeing little, not pausing to look back. The signs of civilisation, the myriad works of man, vanished one by one. When he left the last farm behind him, he abandoned the track, and trod joyously the heather, making for the small tor to the left. When he reached the summit, Dartmoor was obscured by rain and mist. So much the better.

He wanted to feel, not see the immensity of it, to be possessed by the spirits of space, to inhale rapturously the subtle odours of Nature. He desired to present himself as an empty vessel before the Lord, a receiver of any message that might be transmitted. Never had he attempted this before. A solemn faith sustained him. Out of the tangled skeins of thought some fine pattern would, surely, be evolved. The open mind on the open moor besought the Omnipotent Mind to inform it. Would such an invocation be answered?

For the moment, at any rate, he achieved peace; he escaped from the importunities of our too complex civilisation, from the thousand and one conflicting claims of others. The theme of his play, as has been said, was the happy co-ordination of the old order with the new. In his two acts, he had presented both orders with a fidelity that had won commendation from Wrest. The third act demanded inspiration, some solution of a problem that vexed a troubled world disintegrated by war. His solution, if he found it, would adjust the lives of his protagonists. It might not be of universal application. But if it helped a little, if it lightened a few burdens, if it served as a flickering beacon, if it were, in fine, a true solution so far as it went, he would have done "his bit."

He was sensible of one astounding and confounding change in his point of view. He had left his wife under the dominating impulse of making good, of achieving a success at least commensurate with hers. And he had recognised this impulse as vanity. Dartmoor had blown the vanity out of him. The

wilderness had taught him values. He must satisfy himself with no tormenting thought of satisfying others.

Three days before, he had discovered a rough shelter, used by shepherds in summer time. He curled himself up in this, and pulled out his notebook.

He wrote steadily for four hours.

II

As he came down to Chagford, under clearing skies, he heard the silvery bells of Chagford Church, ringing their changes, a pæan of thanksgiving. He sat down in his armchair, drank his tea, and read what he had written. It was good. He resisted the temptation to write more, evoking, instead, the scene as it would be played on the stage. He knew now that this experiment, so far as his work was concerned, had succeeded. He would finish his play, and send it to Godfrey Ambrose. Then he would go back to Jess.

Next morning, he awoke immensely refreshed, eager to take the hill, although the weather was changing for the worse. He decided to explore the wilder country about Cranmere Pool, where the twin Teigns and the Dart bubbled out of the moor. Here a few ponies were grazing, tails tucked in, with their backs to the wind. He saw some rabbits, a crow, and half a dozen curlew. Under the spell of solitude, he wrote for several hours, sensible of an amazing mental exhilaration. But he returned home wet and tired to be scolded by his landlady.

He laughed at her, because the back of his third act was broken. He had mastered it. Nothing else mattered.

Within a fortnight, three weeks exactly from the day when he had left his wife, the third act was finished. He had never worked so quickly or so easily. Words seemed to float to him on the wings of the wind, a message from the Infinite. Pruning, polishing, and typing his manuscript engrossed a few more days. Then he despatched it to Ambrose, asking for a quick decision.

Reaction followed.

He meant to go home, but, somehow, he lingered in Chagford. He did not tell Jess that his work was done, because temptation assailed him to finish the first play. What a triumph to return with something "big" for his wife, to give it to her, and then to see what she made of it. And if it was written, the work must be done away from her. Otherwise, what he shrank from would take place—ininevitable portraiture. Welfare's play, he felt sure, would be somewhat on the lines indicated by that facile worker. Welfare couldn't leave the broad high road. The rough draft was in his bag. He read it through, recalling the odd hours at Manchester and Birmingham when he had wrestled with many difficulties. And, immediately after marriage, he had abandoned the task. Why? Because, primarily, the Jess of his imagination was so different from the real Jess, and he had tried in vain to combine two personalities. Reading over the script, he realised, too, his disabilities. He couldn't work intermittently. Always it had been so. His best

work, invariably, exacted intense concentration. The original idea allured him afresh. And so much had to be done. Jess, moreover, was prepared for a two months' absence. She didn't know as yet that he had sent his finished play to Godfrey Ambrose, or that it was finished. Behind this apparent secretiveness lay, of course, the ardent wish to surprise her, to greet her with the glad assurance: "Ambrose has accepted it." In his letters, he had avoided details about his work. Jess knew that he wasn't normally a very rapid worker. This wonderful Dartmoor had revealed new potentialities. Hitherto, even when he was giving almost undivided attention to housekeeping, he had kept up his journalism, the many "pot-boilers" which he dashed off without effort. Not one had been written at Chagford. He understood now why his serious work had been accomplished slowly. Journalism, the "copy," "turned in" to the minute, had been a drag upon the wheels of imagination. And what a will-o'-the-wisp imagination was! It eluded, maliciously, those who tried to capture and hold it. Across the bogs of Dartmoor it danced joyously and continuously; it flickered and went out in the Regent's Park Road.

This conviction disconcerted him terribly. Burns' lines haunted him.

"To make a home for weans and wife
Is the true pathos and sublime of life."

But his wife must live in London, close to the theatres, within sound of the roaring thoroughfares. And his weans—if they came to him—would be

little Cockneys, tiny citizens of Babylon, precociously wise, exotics, another breed from the hardy, red-cheeked children who raced up and down the Devon hills. He computed slowly the culminating effect of London upon himself. Since his Oxford days, he had lived and worked in London, but always his small flat had served as a sanctuary. After marriage, he had been not only in but of London. And its myriad exactions had wearied him. How soon the excitement of ordering a new house, of "doing things" well, a shade better than the "other fellow," had evaporated. He had helped to "boom" his wife, his sweet Jess, and the inevitable "slump" had followed.

During his first week's vagabondage, when he had rushed hither and thither, rejoicing in his freedom, he had found a small house high above the lovely valley of the Teign, looking down upon the river where it widened below Chagford bridge. A delightful garden encompassed it, with half a dozen great trees throwing translucent shadows upon a velvety lawn. A notice board informed all comers that the place was to be let or sold. Cherry had tapped at the back door, and the caretaker, who opened it, invited him in. Together they went over the house. It was just right for a couple of moderate means, and held at a modest rental. What a home for a man who wished to escape from the importunate crowd.

Later on, when he was at work, he put resolutely from him all thoughts of what might have been if Jess were other than she was. Absence from her rekindled loyalty to her. In a spirit of altruism he

had wooed and won her. Afterwards, when they had settled down, he was sensible that the exactions of the flesh had reinstated self. Now, leading a simple and ascetic life, self slunk into the shadows, whence it mocked him harmlessly. He must make Jess happy. Together, without friction, they would reconsider their position. For a few months, they had attempted the impossible ; the double yoke of pleasure-seeking and working had exhausted him and would, in time, exhaust her.

Smart society must be scrapped.

So far, so good.

He remained, meanwhile, at Chagford, and began to rewrite the Jess play.

III

But, if it was well with the husband, during this brief dissolution of partnership, it was not so well with the wife. Mere work, and the love of working, failed to satisfy Jess. For this we must blame Cherry and the unwritten, seemingly immutable laws that make a true understanding of women so difficult to men. A clever man takes certain things for granted ; a clever woman becomes restless and unhappy because she doesn't. Every woman, excepting those who are essentially masculine, craves for love expressed. Love unexpressed excites and exasperates them. Cherry's love for his wife lay between the lines of his letters, not in them. Miss Oldacre would have seen this, but Jess did not show her husband's letters to Miss Oldacre. She read and pondered them alone. Had he written

with entire frankness, had he, for instance, told her of the house near Chagford, and described vividly his emotions when he imagined himself and her living in it, she would have understood him. Reticence about his work was another masculine blunder. Away from her, he became shadowy, unreal. She was incapable of taking for granted that this was an experiment, an attempt to accomplish a definite end, to be talked over exhaustively later on. As a matter of fact, Cherry missed her terribly, ached at times with longing for her, but he didn't tell her so, because he foolishly supposed that it would upset her. It was conceivable, indeed, that such a creature might cancel material obligations and rush to him. Behind this again lay the conviction that much as he wanted his wife the experiment would be imperilled if she did rush to him.

To add to her distress she was conscious of something startlingly unexpected. Her work at the theatre was losing its quality. What Miss Oldacre had predicted at Manchester came to pass. An unhappy woman off the stage was unable to diffuse happiness on it. A great actress, Jess supposed, soared above herself. She reflected miserably that, perhaps, she was a mere mummer, only able to play simple parts, malleable to the hand of producer and author. Ultimately, she took counsel with Miss Oldacre, stating her case with uncompromising fidelity. But Miss Oldacre, seeking for causes to explain effects, probed deeper.

"If it is true, Jess, that you are playing less well, that you are beginning to question your own powers

as an actress, which we all do at times, and if you assign uneasiness of mind as a reason for this, I must ask you why your mind is uneasy."

Jess remained silent.

"Perhaps my wish to help you is greater than your wish to be helped."

Her voice was as soft as her eyes. Jess said :

"I hate to admit certain things to myself."

"Yes ; to do that requires real courage."

After a pause, Jess went on :

"I—I don't know whether I married Cherry for love. I—I wanted to be loved by him. You remember Florrie ?" Miss Oldacre nodded. "Florrie told me that she would marry when she loved a man better than she loved herself."

"Quite sound."

"But how can one make sure ? Anyway, a partnership with Cherry seemed to me just right. He wanted to write plays ; I wanted to act plays ; he loved me ; I thought I could make him happy and be happy. I didn't make him happy. And now I am unhappy."

"I see."

"If I had not married, if I had given myself, as you did, entirely to my profession, I should be happy."

"Provided you succeeded."

"If I remained happy, I should succeed."

"Are you unhappy, because you think you have made Cherry unhappy ?"

"I have made two other men unhappy."

"Two—— ?"

Under sympathetic pressure and solemn pledges

of secrecy, Jess entered the confessional box. No priest could have listened to a penitent with greater understanding than that which informed Miss Oldacre, or with a livelier sense of the issues involved. This talk took place at the time when Cherrington was sending his script to Ambrose, and torn in two between his desire to return to his wife and the conviction that if he did so the play intended for her would never be written. During the past three weeks, George, it appeared, had lost his head and his heart, jumping to the conclusion that his Jess had been unwarrantably annexed by a heartless, cold-blooded scribbler, who had deserted his bride at the first opportunity. Mr. Lenox Hambrough, with less excuse for mental aberration, was of the same opinion.

"I thought they were pals."

"I am sure you did. Go on!"

"I can't. It's too hateful. They 'burst' almost simultaneously, within twenty-four hours of each other. They did it here, in this room. I shall never like this room again. I can understand why some women buy new furniture. What makes it worse, they were sitting in that chair." She indicated a most respectable eighteenth-century chair of the Chippendale period. "And it belongs to Cherry. I can't sell it without his asking questions." She concluded viciously: "An accident will happen to that chair."

Miss Oldacre laughed, but she was intensely sorry for Jess. Nevertheless her sense of humour was tickled. She observed slyly:

"If you had made them happy, Jess, I should be

very miserable. The unhappiness of these naughty boys doesn't distress me at all."

"They accused me of being cold-blooded. Perhaps I am. Jack—he is Mr. Hambrough now—was a real pal when I played Leila. And, as you know, I have to play with him in this piece. But it won't last till Christmas. The notices may go up at any time, the sooner the better. It comes to this. I don't know where I am. I'm not in the next production, for one thing. But Mr. Welfare tells me that his play is done. Suppose I can't play a big part?"

Miss Oldacre consoled her.

IV

Within a day or two, Miss Jessica Yeo received a registered parcel, which held Welfare's comedy, beautifully typed.

She devoted Sunday afternoon to reading it. Her part, if she accepted it, would demand all the resources of a finished actress. Failure to play such a part adequately would provoke disaster. Miss Oldacre took the script to her bedroom on Sunday evening. On Monday morning, after breakfast, she delivered a portentous verdict.

"The part is greater than the whole. Mr. Welfare, evidently, has faith in you. I should have jumped at it in my best days, but, even then I should have trembled at the responsibility imposed. If you can do it, you may go round the world with it. The interest centres in you and on you. Up to the middle of the third act I see you. After that

great things are expected—passion, terror, despair culminating in triumph. To hold all that, to sustain the tension, to tighten it till your audience is racked with excitement and suspense will try you high."

"Too high?" murmured Jess, with faint interrogation.

"I don't know."

"Who is producing this play?"

Again Jess, not without slight irritation, had to acknowledge ignorance. Why this absurd mystery? Miss Oldacre was prompt with her answer.

"You see, my dear, vanity is the besetting sin of our profession. Mr. Welfare would not like it known that anyone had turned down his play. For all we know to the contrary, he may not have submitted this to a manager. Are you pledged to play this part?"

"Not yet."

"Well, you might ask him quietly what theatre he has in his eye, but he may not tell you. Was there a note?"

Jess produced the note, with the remark: "He doesn't waste his ink."

Welfare had scribbled one line:

"Does Miss Yeo want to eat this?"

"Take your time," counselled her wise friend.

"As this is a *non-matinée* day, we might read the big scene together after luncheon."

Jess kissed her gratefully.

When the appointed hour came, Jess gave the first reading. Miss Oldacre had recognised long ago her mimetic powers, her astounding receptivity further fortified by an excellent memory. But what

would Jess make, uninstructed, of a big part? Really this was the first convincing test. Had she passion? Could she simulate passion if—as those naughty boys suggested—she was cold-blooded? In her heart, Nan Oldacre was furious with them, particularly with George, the selfish, blundering idiot. She sided with her own sex. She felt a certain exasperation when she thought of Cherry leaving his ewe lamb at the mercy of ravening wolves. Indeed, she had considered the propriety of writing, urging him to return home. She could take household care from his shoulders. On second thoughts, however, she had not written, fearing to interfere between husband and wife. As a philosopher, she decided that if this nice couple loved each other Time would adjust their little differences. To distract Jess, to make her happy again, engrossed her attentions and energies.

Possibly Jess had been piqued by her friend's candour. More probably she was unduly strung up by her misadventures. At any rate, she attacked her Goliath of a scene with the pluck of David.

"That's not bad, my dear."

"I'm dying to see you at it."

Miss Oldacre went at it consummately with unerring skill and experience.

"What a stick I am," groaned Jess.

"You are not conceited, child. I ventured once to criticise a young relative, she replied pertly: 'I earn a larger salary than you do, Aunt Nan.' But she is resting now. Try again."

Warmed by encouragement, Jess attacked again and again. Determination and patience are the

acolytes of Genius. Presently Miss Oldacre said, not too positively:

"Perhaps you can do it. Let's have tea."

"I have never been so excited in all my life—except once."

Then, meeting an interrogative glance, Jess blushed, thinking of herself with her hair rippling to her waist and an ivory brush in her hand. Miss Oldacre asked no questions, but she smiled inwardly as she reflected: "I needn't ask who else was excited."

The ladies enjoyed their tea.

That night, after the performance, Welfare saw Jess in her dressing-room. The big fellow looked more lethargic than ever, as if he were gorged with his new play. Jess was aware that he spoke lightly of what he esteemed to be his best work. He accepted a cigarette, and smiled at her. At a nod from Jess, the discreet Mrs. Hunkins went out.

"A square meal, eh?" said Welfare.

"I am trying to digest it. It's a wonderful part, Mr. Welfare. I—I can't thank you enough. If I let you down——?"

Welfare shrugged his shoulders.

"We are going a bit too fast, Jess. The play isn't accepted yet."

"Have you approached any manager?"

He wagged a finger at her.

"Of course I have. Don't ask me who he is. He's considering the bally thing, probably at this very moment. He can take it or leave it. There are others. He may be a bit scared of you. I shouldn't say that, if I was. By the way, you have

a warm admirer in Pumford, poor Crewe's general manager."

Jess became alert.

"Pummy——! Then I know your manager. It's Mr. Godfrey Ambrose."

Welfare chuckled.

"Poor Cherry!" he ejaculated.

"Why?"

"It must be disconcerting sometimes to have as sharp a little wife as you are. Yes; Ambrose has my stuff. Not a word! I look upon him as the liveliest and most enterprising of the new lot. He seems to see big possibilities in this play, *if you get over*. America, for instance. Would you go to America?"

"I should have to talk to Cherry about that."

"There is no hurry. I have given Ambrose a clear week. If I could make a real pot out of this, I should retire."

"You wouldn't."

Welfare laughed at her solemn, incredulous face.

"Who knows? Years ago, I knew a good fellow who was on the Stock Exchange. He made his pile during the great rubber boom, cleaned up two hundred thousand, and invested the lot in gilt-edged securities, chucked speculation and all business for ever and ever. Poor devil!"

"Why do you call him that?"

"He has paid the bill. When he lived at Woking—Woking!!!—with a couple of servants, he was the happiest, jolliest chap in the world. Now, he keeps himself in cotton-wool. He is terrified that

he may die. He carries a clinical thermometer in his pocket. I knew another good dog. He made his bit. And six months afterwards his doctor told him that he couldn't live a year. So he blew in every bob in that year. And he's still alive and kicking—himself."

"I believe you would cut jokes at your own funeral."

"I hope so. I am sure I shall be amused at my Memorial Service," he got up, still chuckling, as he held out his hand.

"You have frightened me," Jess confessed. "If this play means so much to you, I—I funk it."

"Bah! Win or lose—I enjoy my dinner. I enjoy my cigar. A big success might demoralise me. That's why I told you those two yarns. Bye-bye."

Mrs. Hunkins came back. Jess began to remove her "make up." Welfare, somehow, had aroused apprehensions. She wondered if Mrs. Hunkins could allay them.

"Do you believe in luck?" she asked abruptly

"Who doesn't?"

"Do you think good luck is paid for?"

"Well, yes; I do. Nobody has nothink both ways, not even dressers. I had my dip in the lucky bag when Mr. Hunkins died. But, bless you, I was hardly beginning to enjoy myself when I come down with rheumatic fever."

"Oh, dear! I've never come down with anything."

"You will," affirmed Mrs. Hunkins.

V

Jess lay awake that night, tossing upon an uneasy pillow, helplessly aware that circumstances beyond control were proving too strong for her. She might be asked to go to America. And Miss Oldacre was positive that an actress must take her call, back her luck or lose it. What had been said by the wise old lady, two days before, sank deep into a plastic mind. It required real courage to admit to oneself—facts. Such courage had never failed her at Sloden-Pauncefort. As a girl, she had realised that sheltered lives were lived under artificial conditions. Most of her neighbours and friends imposed upon themselves and others absurd standards and shibboleths. As a rule they had no appreciation of anything outside the Forest of Ys. George's father, the jolly squire, was revered because his covers always held foxes. Jess could remember the stranger who took a small house in the village for the summer. Nobody called upon him, except Mr. Yeo. Nobody, except Mr. Yeo, knew that he was a world-famous man of science. One day, the squire said bluffly: "Who is this fellow, Yeo? Does anybody know anything about him?" And her father replied drily, "He is a Past President of the Chemical Society, Royal Medallist and Davy Medallist, and an honoured member of half the learned associations in Europe and America." The squire was slightly taken aback, but he growled out: "Why has such a man come here?" Mr. Yeo replied grimly, sensible, perhaps, that his own claims to consideration were ignored in the sleepy

village: "I can tell you that, because he told me. He selected Sloden-Pauncefort, widely awake to the fact that everybody here would leave him alone with his research work, not knowing or caring who he was." Jess had been more impressed than the squire by her father's curt words. She had thought the more intelligently because speech was discouraged. Her revolt against meaningless rules, imposed by Authority with no better reason than the affirmation that Authority, in its time, kowtowed to the same inanities, had driven her from home. She wanted to escape; and she had escaped. For a few months she had exulted in her freedom, believing fondly that the world was her oyster. Now, when everybody accounted her the luckiest of young women she began to appraise this wonderful luck, to ask whither it was leading her.

Obviously, it was leading her from her husband. And, left alone, she had discovered her dependence on him. For example, to cite a tiny instance, gadding about to luncheons and suppers without him ceased to amuse. She missed his easy, pleasant comments upon these entertainments; she missed his little attentions, his never-failing solicitude for her comfort; she missed his kisses. Her cheeks flamed when she thought of "Jack" and George. The hussar had written abjectly from Canterbury, entreating forgiveness. She could regard George, maternally, as a "naughty boy." In the hunting-field, he went out of his way to jump formidable obstacles. In his own words, he had taken an "awful toss." She knew that he must be badly bruised. Mr. Lenox Hambrough aroused no pitiful

feelings. He had not apologised. With brazen effrontery, he dared to whitewash himself with the excuse that "Change partners" was indelibly inscribed upon the alluring faces of grass widows! With small experience in such matters, she guessed that this was the considered opinion of men who labelled themselves as "of the world." She might expect other mortifying adventures so long as she remained unattached. The daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Yeo confronted this certainty with horror. Horror, however, was tempered by the humorous reflection that nobody can really escape from their parents. To her grave, she would carry certain inherited characteristics. Decency happened to be one of them. Obstinacy happened to be another. The spell of the footlights was not quite so potent, but the desire to prove herself something greater than a player of easy parts had increased. Her last resolution, before she fell asleep, shaped itself into compromise:

"I shall make good in this big part; then I shall become Mrs. Cherrington."

A surprise awaited her, next morning. A shiny card, embellished with silver riband, informed her that Florrie was about to be married to Harry. To see Florrie, to ask her soul-stirring questions, became an imperious necessity. Mrs. Toop was in lodgings in Bloomsbury. Thither Jess betook herself at the first opportunity. She found Florrie alone. Florrie embraced her affectionately.

"You are a dear to come and see me," she exclaimed.

Jess wasted no time.

"So you really love Harry better than yourself?"

This observation had to be explained. Florrie remembered what others said of her, not what she said of herself.

"He's so respectable, dear. Muds told me I must think of the future. If I could have played in London——! No complaints. Muds says to me: 'Florrie, me girl, you won't never be another Miss Oldacre.' That's Gawd's truth, isn't it?"

Jess admitted that the odds were against Miss Osborne being cast for "Juliet" or "Portia."

"I could play 'Juliet' now," affirmed Florrie, blushing. "Well, dear, I don't mind telling you that my Harry is not what the world calls a 'Romeo,' but he's a bit of all right. Muds and me both agree that the stage, so to speak, ain't a cosy corner, nothing snug about it, is there? Harry calls me his queen. You can't queen it in cheap lodgings, on tour."

Florrie continued volubly, reminding Jess of parsons whose arguments in the pulpit are obviously intended to convince the preacher rather than the congregation. Florrie, glad to entertain so attentive a listener, began an indictment of the stage from the point of view of one who desired to persuade herself that she was right in leaving it.

"It's all make-believe, isn't it? You have to kid yerself into thinking you're somebody else. Lordy! I used to dream of some o' the 'props,' and wish they was mine, although I knew the stage-carpenter had knocked 'em together. Harry has let me buy our furniture at The London Area Furnishing Company. We shall pay for it out of

income. Lovely stuff! A young gentleman in a frock coat told me exactly what I wanted."

Jess kissed her, wished her luck, and went away, quite sure that Florrie knew what she wanted and had got it. At supper, she repeated to Miss Oldacre, almost *verbatim*, what Florrie had said.

"My dear, I have not met Harry, but Florrie will be the queen of her home."

"Ought the wife to be queen, and her hubby a mere prince consort?"

"One of the two must reign. Can we blame the men because they take kingship for granted? We women have encouraged them to do so. But, always, a woman rules if she is the stronger. Strength is independent of sex. The woman who aspires to be dominant partner must ask herself whether or not she can sustain the rôle."

"I suppose so."

VI

Before that week was out, Jess was invited to call upon Mr. Godfrey Ambrose at the theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue which he controlled so efficiently. She was curious to meet a man of whom she had heard much and seen nothing. At the appointed hour, she was shown into a large room at the top of the building.

"Mr. Ambrose will be with you in a minute."

Left alone, Jess surveyed the *mise en scène*. She discovered at a glance that Mr. Ambrose possessed an extensive dramatic library. Plays, ancient and modern, filled the bookshelves. Above them were many portraits of players past and present. Two

easy chairs faced a cheerful wood fire ; an immense desk was littered with papers. She decided that this room was much more than an office. It reflected faithfully a personality. The Persian carpet, the damask curtains, the ample hearth, lined with red unglazed Dutch tiles, indicated good taste. The windows were of opaque glass, palely amber. The dull light of a mid-November morning, filtering through these, became transmuted into sunshine. The room had a glow. Possibly, Mr. Ambrose desired to shut himself off from a wilderness of chimney pots.

Jess sat down to warm cold toes. Between her chair and the wall stood a mahogany pie-crust table, recognised as such because Cherry possessed one much like it, which he pronounced a "gem." Upon this table lay two scripts. Jess, without any wish to pry, saw that one script was Welfare's play. Having a carbon copy of it, she picked it up, intending to glance through the list of characters. As she did so, her eyes dilated, and a slight gasp escaped her. The script lying alone on the pie-crust table was Cherry's. His name confronted her.

Hastily, Jess put back the Welfare play, and closed her eyes. Cherry had finished his play—and he had not told his wife—and he remained absent from her !

She felt herself trembling.

What did it mean ?

Her first impulse was to rush from the room. Yeo common sense saved an ignominious retreat. Mr. Ambrose, if he found an empty room, would infer that he was dealing with a vacuum, and dismiss her as such from consideration. When he came in, she

must play a part, smile sweetly, answer all questions adequately, beguile him with the soft inflections of her voice.

"I shall behave like Jessica Yeo."

She felt split in two. The half that was actress stared at the half that was wife. Some devil seemed to be whispering to the wife: "Cherry doesn't love you. He's happy without you. You have been absorbed in yourself. He's absorbed in himself. This is your punishment."

Ambrose came in, short, thick-set, Napoleonic.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Miss Yeo. Some people have no sense of the value of time. Can I offer you a cigarette?"

"No thanks."

He sat down opposite to her, made himself comfortable, rested his arms upon the padded sides of the chair, and leaned back. Then he spoke curtly:

"Welfare wants you to play this big part. He tells me you have read it. Can you do it?"

"Are you offering it to me, Mr. Ambrose?"

"Not yet. Do you feel that you have enough experience to tackle it?"

"My experience is hardly visible to the naked eye."

Ambrose laughed; he liked candour and modesty. Then he spoke in his most business-like tones.

"Of course, you know that your husband has sent me a very remarkable play."

He paused for a moment. Fortunately, he was not looking at Jess, who winced. He got up, crossed to the pie-crust table, and picked up both scripts. Meanwhile Jess recovered her composure. Let him

take for granted that she knew. How could she confess to a stranger the humiliating truth?

Ambrose went on, tapping the scripts with nervous fingers.

"I have made up my mind, Miss Yeo. I shall rehearse immediately after Christmas *one* of these two plays. In Mr. Cherrington's play there is no suitable part for you."

"I am aware of that, Mr. Ambrose."

"Welfare's play in my opinion is not comparable with your husband's. Wrest, the critic, was immensely impressed by Mr. Cherrington's two first acts. He spoke to me about them. He read the third act last night. He is astonished at the power of it, and so am I. All the same, he knows what I know, that the production of a play, so serious, so obviously written with a tremendous moral purpose behind it, is a hazardous speculation. I doubt whether any other London manager would take the risk. But I have faith in the British playgoer, and I should be proud to produce such a play—win or lose. I will add one word more. I have here our finest romantic actor, and I have a string on him. He will play in my next production if he approves his part. I have not shown him Mr. Cherrington's script. But he will jump at such a chance. Now, this is my dilemma. If I do the Welfare play, I shall lose my leading man. He has a dozen offers at this moment. It is unlikely that I should get him back. Did your husband write this play at Chagford? It came from there."

"He wrote the third act there."

"I am not surprised. He has done a bold thing.

It is plain to me that he has written with absolute detachment, with the determination to satisfy himself—regardless of everybody else."

Jess nodded.

"I admire and respect his courage. I return to the Welfare play. Humanly speaking, that is a 'sitter,' if — if you, or some other capable young actress, can make good. Nobody has a greater sense of the stage than Welfare. He writes for a large public whom he understands. Managers ask for his plays, because, as a rule, they are winners. Welfare can place this comedy of his with two actresses of experience, one under her own management; the other cannot come to me. But Welfare wants you. He admits that he wrote this play for you. Are you following me closely?"

"I am treading on your heels, Mr. Ambrose."

"I cannot do the Welfare play unless you play in it. And I must decide at once. Mr. Cherrington, also, asks for a quick decision. The situation is rather dramatic. Welfare tells me that your husband knows that this play was written for you, but I gather that Mr. Cherrington does not know that I have it."

"I—I don't think so."

"I am wondering whether he would sooner I did his play or offered you a terrific part. Possibly, you don't realise that it is—terrific."

"Indeed I do."

"I should shrink, Miss Yeo, from asking your husband to make a decision. Besides, I make my own decisions. In this case, my decision hangs on you. I cannot ask so clever a young lady, so

surprisingly successful, to rehearse on approval. And, if I did, and if you consented, and withdrew later, how could I replace you? But I thought, under the very exceptional circumstances, that you might read to me, here and now, the big scene, so as to give me some inkling of your capacity to play it. Really, it is a question of diction—intonation—feeling. I am quick at forming an opinion. Wait one moment. I would point out to you that if I decided—in your interests as much as my own—that you lacked the power to sustain such a weighty rôle, you would have the satisfaction of knowing that I was pledged to do your husband's play. I am willing so to pledge myself."

"I understand."

She paused, drawing in her breath sharply, conscious of nothing except an extraordinary, overwhelming desire to show this man what she could do. He looked at her with doubtful eyes. So had Miss Oldacre. She was wrought to such a tension that she simply leaped at this opportunity to release the feelings she had suppressed so rigorously. To just such a tension Welfare had brought his heroine.

"I'll try," she said.

The tone of her voice challenged attention. It thrilled a man not easily moved. He said gratefully:

"This is very good of you."

Jess jumped up, holding out her hand for the script. Ambrose saw that she was trembling. "The right temperament," he thought.

She turned over the crisp pages, till she came to the big scene. Then she moved away from Ambrose, who swung round in his chair. Jess glanced at the

stage directions. She sat down, and began. Presently she rose, moving nearer to Ambrose as she read. He remained in his chair, captivated by her soft voice. Long before she reached the climax, he had decided that Welfare was right. She could do it. Passion quivered out of her. Ambrose, rigid himself with excitement, divined somehow that a soul was in anguish. The effect produced on him became uncanny, weird. It seemed to him, a kindly man, that he had asked too much, that what he exacted was causing suffering.

"Stop, please!"

He held up his hand.

Jess heard his peremptory voice. For some time he had ceased to be so far as she was concerned. It was no simulated emotion that came from her. She had been swept leagues and leagues away to far Devon. She was speaking to her husband, revealing herself in an ecstasy of passion and despair to a man whose love she had forfeited.

The sharp injunction was obeyed mechanically. She stood limp before him, vaguely understanding that the ordeal was over. To save her life, she couldn't have passed judgment on her reading. Ambrose stood up.

"I am sorry," he said gravely. "I beg your pardon."

"You don't think I can do it?"

"I know you can do it. I haven't a doubt left. I am sorry that I imposed such a strain. I offer you the part with enthusiasm; I beg you to accept. We shan't quarrel about terms."

Jess burst into tears.

Ambrose, much upset, ministered to her as well as he could, insisting that she should drink a glass of wine, trying to make light of her breakdown, but thinking to himself: "This girl is a bundle of nerves. I must take great care of her. What a sensitive plant!"

However, to his immense relief, she recovered self-control within a few minutes. She smiled at him faintly:

"What a fool you must think me!"

He reassured her on that point.

Before she left him, he demanded an answer to the insistent question.

"Will you play this part, Miss Yeo?"

"I must have time."

"But certainly. Six weeks, seven weeks, if you like, although I am no believer in too many rehearsals."

"I must have a few hours, I mean, to decide whether I can accept the engagement."

Ambrose frowned, wondering whether Miss Yeo employed an agent, who might demand a prohibitive salary. Jess was now alert enough to interpret the frown.

"It is not a question of terms, Mr. Ambrose."

His face cleared.

"That's quite all right, Miss Yeo. Let me know as reasonably soon as you can."

Upon the threshold of the door she paused.

"You really meant what you said just now?"

"Meant it? If you don't triumph gloriously, I am the biggest ass in the profession."

"Thank you. I—I was speaking of your promise

to do my husband's play, if—if you couldn't do Mr. Welfare's."

Ambrose looked disconcerted, but he said curtly :

"I keep my promise. If Welfare's comedy can't be done with you, I shall accept your husband's play." He laughed pleasantly. "Do you want that in writing?"

"Of course not."

As the door closed behind her, Ambrose pulled a pipe from his pocket, and filled it pensively. On rare occasions, when he was mentally perturbed, he muttered to himself. He did so now, staring at the two scripts.

"You *are* the biggest ass in the profession. Why did you lug in the husband?" Then, puffing at his pipe, he added, "I don't care. I shall do one or 'tother." He sat down near the fire, and picked up both scripts. But he began to re-read the Welfare comedy.

CHAPTER X

ENLIGHTENMENT

I

JESS returned home, after her great triumph, telling herself that she was the most miserable young woman in London. She might have confided this conviction to Miss Oldacre, but that sympathetic lady was out shopping. Jess surveyed her house with critical eyes before she entered it. She lingered in the hall, the drawing-room, the dining-room, and finally retreated to her bedroom, locking the door.

It was her house, whatever happened. But everything in it called to mind Cherry. She took off her furs which he had given to her, staring at her husband's photograph. The smile upon his clever face struck her for the first time as derisive. It seemed to say: "Yes, I have done for you what I could; I have established you here as Queen; you owe everything to me; what, pray, have you done to advance my interests?"

Imagination, it must be admitted, played havoc with her. She reasoned as before, logically enough, but again from a wrong premiss. Cherry had withheld confidence because he had ceased to love her. He had assigned a definite reason for leaving her—his third act could not be written satisfyingly at

home. That reason had been accepted with bitter resignation, because, surely, something was wrong radically with a home in which a man was unable to do his best work. He had left her. And then, having achieved his object triumphantly, so it appeared, he had not come back, keeping secret from her what he had done, exposing her, deliberately, to such humiliation that she writhed at the memory of it.

It says much for her that at such a moment, suffering atrociously, she was honest with herself, although incapable of being quite fair to him.

She had not married him for love. Had he said to her: "Choose between your ambition and me; chuck the stage and live in the country with me," she might have refused such terms. But, immediately after marriage, she had learned to appreciate his love, to depend upon it, to curl herself up, like a cat, in the warmth of it, to purr beneath his caresses. And then, just like a cat, she had gone out to catch mice on her own account.

Ravaged by these reflections, computing her debt to Cherry, she thought of her parents. What had they felt, when she cut loose from them? She owed much to them, but, like Cherry, she had left home, because ambition lured her away. In fine, happiness had been achieved at the expense of others—her nearest and dearest. Fate, Destiny, God—if you believed in a Personal Deity—had granted her heart's desire which now was turning to ashes.

She stared at the twin beds.

Upon Cherry's bed were two new frocks, which she eyed contemptuously. She contrasted flesh and

blood with *chiffons*. Suddenly she became aware that she was chilled to the bone. The room had no fire in it. If she lit the fire, piled on the coal, roasted herself over it, this room above all others would remain cold, because Cherry no longer loved her. If he had ceased to love her, he would never come back—never. She recalled what he had said at Brighton about marriages of convenience, about the ill-mated couples who must have faced the facts of life in that absurdly over-decorated suite of rooms. Neither he nor she could tolerate living together without love. That was prostitution, hateful, degrading, the sin against the Holy Ghost.

She wanted to cry her eyes out, but, fiercely, she put from her the last resource of the weak female. She had wept before Ambrose, a stranger. And his kindness, sympathy and strength, had served to accentuate her sense of dependence.

"I can do one thing," she thought, "and I'll do it—*now*."

She dared not leave this cold room for fear of meeting Miss Oldacre, who might return at any minute. In a corner stood a small writing bureau, an untouched Queen Anne bit, originally her husband's most precious possession. He had given it to her.

She picked up a pen and wrote :

"DEAR MR. AMBROSE,—I cannot play this big part. Perhaps it is as well both for you and me that I refuse to attempt it. I might let you down. I have so much to learn. Believe me that I am sorry, but Mr. Welfare, as you said, will place his play

easily elsewhere. And you will produce my husband's play. And I feel, somehow, that in your hands it will be a great and noble production. Will you do me a favour? Let me have the pleasure of telling my husband that you have accepted his play. A few lines from you to me will suffice.

"Sincerely yours,

"JESSICA CHERRINGTON."

She paused before she signed the letter. Had she accepted the part she would have written "Yeo" instead of "Cherrington." Perhaps she wanted a shrewd man to infer that a wife was considering her husband's interests. In that case, he would accept her decision as final.

Having written the letter, she turned to deliver it. She slipped on her furs, and hurried back to the theatre. A clerk at the box-office told her that Ambrose was in his room. He promised to hand the letter to his chief. Jess waited till he came back. Yes; Mr. Ambrose had received it

II

Meanwhile, Cherry was working away in blissful ignorance of what was taking place in London. It never occurred to him that Welfare might have finished his comedy, although he knew that Welfare was a "lightning" dramatist. Wags at The Buskin affirmed that he could write an act between breakfast and luncheon. Indeed, he boasted that a four act "winner" had been conceived, composed, and delivered in three weeks! On the other hand,

a less successful play had engrossed his energies for a full year. Welfare jibed mercilessly at critics who condemned "speed" in writers. What tosh! Some literary giant did their best work swiftly; others advanced inch by inch, creeping and crawling. Nobody but a critic could dogmatise on such a tricky theme. Nothing mattered but the result. Let critics acclaim the "goods" if they were "right." How, when and where they were manufactured lay beyond their ken and jurisdiction. As a matter of fact Welfare had taken two months over the Jess comedy, and behind that stretched a stage experience of twenty years.

When at work, Cherry was happy; after his labours, at ease in his comfortable chair, he tried, not so happily, to adjust his marital relations. It exasperated him to reflect that Jess and he, within a few months of the honeymoon, had come to cross roads. However, being optimistic when in robust health, he decided that, in the immediate future, he would follow along her appointed track, with the comforting reflection that, if necessary, he could "fly" that track for a few weeks, and then rejoin her. He admitted frankly that her position as an actress was not as yet assured. She must "establish" herself in London, not budge from it, till she was hailed as a fixed star.

Unwisely, he withheld these reflections from Jess, believing that she must be spared worry. It was obvious to him—as to Miss Oldacre—that her indefinable charm "got over" because joy in living is as contagious as measles. He had said to her again and again: "Your dimples do it." Accordingly,

he wrote to her cheering letters which might have been penned by one jolly boy describing the amusing incidents of the holidays to another jolly boy. Jess, reading these light-hearted epistles, thought wretchedly :

“ He’s skating over thin ice.”

Working enthusiastically for Jess made him think of Jess, in all her moods and tenses. He was not attempting her portrait, but he remembered what Welfare had said about building up a part for a player, bearing in mind that player’s abilities and disabilities. To accomplish this, Cherry had to depart from the golden rule which, according to Welfare, kept gold from the box-office. He couldn’t work with detachment. The third act of his serious play had, somehow, written itself. Now he suffered from the usual intermittences, pausing to consider whether or not Jess was shining brilliantly. These intermittences might last for hours. And the weather in late November had become so bitter that he was forced to write indoors, close to a roaring fire.

Nevertheless, when inspiration failed, he rushed, as before, on to the moor, part of which he was beginning to know well. The wild portion, encompassing the sources of the Dart and Teign, attracted him irresistibly. A visitor to Chagford described it as bleak. “ That describes you,” thought Cherry. A place was like a book ; you found in it what you took to it.

Bleak—— !

Some fools would say that of Turner’s “ Frosty Morning.”

The November mornings were frosty Ice lay

upon the pools reflecting cold, clear skies. The moor was spangled with crystal. Out of it rose the great tors superbly defined and detached. Woe to the man who took liberties with them. Down Chagford way, the gaffers, over a glass of ale, spoke of Dartmoor as the Bretons speak of the sea. To them it was a *dulce monstrum*, a personality to be placated, never to be offended. If offence were given, let the offender beware! Retribution would follow. Much of the folk-lore, whispered in ingle-nooks, hard to overhear because "foreigners" scoffed at it, dealt with this vindictive spirit of the wilderness. The loneliness of the tors had significance. They wanted to be left alone.

Upon the day when Jess called upon Godfrey Ambrose, Cherry found himself "dried up." He took the road to Fernworthy, disregarding the warning of his landlady, who predicted snow before night. Snow lay deep in the Midlands, and the north wind, when it reached Dartmoor, confirmed what was reported in the papers. Cherry, glancing up at the moving clouds, decided that snow might fall during the night. He pushed on, complacently conscious of excellent underpinning, reached the moor about one o'clock, and ate his sandwiches. It would be quite dark at half-past four. He would have ample time to climb Teign Head, and be back to tea.

This wild part of Dartmoor was now familiar to him, so he gave himself up to thought, concentrating attention upon the problem that had baffled him. Half-way up Teign Head, a new solution seemed to present itself, as he had hoped it would. He

climbed up and on till he found himself in a mist. At first this was accepted as a common incident. Unfortunately, he had wandered from the beaten track to the summit.

The mist thickened.

Cherry turned and began to descend the sharp slope of the hill, noticing that the wind had dropped. He stood still. A profound silence encompassed him. He strained his ears in the effort to catch the tinkle of running water. If he could strike some tiny rivulet, he might be able to follow it. Instead, he heard the mournful wail of a curlew. By this time the mist was so thick that he descended cautiously. All bearings were lost. He knew that he was creeping downhill, nothing else. The mist became white as a winding-sheet.

He shouted.

No answer came through the blinding mist. He stood alone in the abomination of desolation !

Sailors, he reflected, whistled for the wind ; the wind would lift this pall from him. So he whistled, and the distant wail of the curlew came back, mocking him. It seemed to say : " I belong here ; you are a trespasser."

He pushed on, step by step, prodding the ground with his stick. Where was Fernworthy ? It might lie north, south, east or west. In a shop at Chagford he had seen a pocket compass. He had thought of buying it. But his attention had been distracted by something else.

The ground became softer. At any moment he might plunge into some treacherous bog. He remembered the tag quoted by one of the gaffers.

"On Dartmoor you can't go anywhere except where you can; on Exmoor you can go everywhere except where you can't."

He sat down, listening. Surely some kind voice from the moor would guide him. Cows often wandered far afield with bells on their wrinkled necks. Some cock might crow on an outlying farm. But the farms were far away; the cows were carrying full udders to the byre.

He discovered that he was getting cold. The grass beneath his fingers was icy. He must keep moving, keep warm. He got up and edged away from the soft ground. If he could find any sort of fuel he might light a fire. He lit his pipe and felt less solitary at once. At regular intervals he shouted.

He looked at his watch. Only half an hour had passed. And it had seemed an eternity. Would he survive a night on a freezing moor? A night——! Mists at such a time of year might lift in a minute or linger for days. If a party left Chagford to search for him, would he, a few hours hence, have strength enough to answer their shouts? Would they know where to look for him? What had he said to his landlady? Had he mentioned Teign Head? No. But she knew that he was going to Fernworthy, because he had spoken of buying some clotted cream there.

"I must stick it out," he thought.

III

At the end of an hour or more, despite his efforts to keep warm, he realised that he was chilled to the

bone ; and night was coming on apace. He decided to climb Teign Head, remembering that mists often lay thick upon the moor, when the tors rose above them. As he ascended step by step, he discovered to his immense satisfaction that he could see farther and farther ahead of him, and the wind struck cold on his face. Finally he emerged from the fog, and was able to take bearings. Below, the whole world seemed to be wrapped in clouds of palest grey. Above, darker clouds—snow-laden—impended. The wind grew stronger and colder, sweeping away the mists below, making curious chasms into which he peered. But, as swiftly, other mists took their place, like spirits engaged in a dance. As he watched them, a snowflake fell upon his cheek. To remain upon Teign Head, during a snowstorm in November, meant death. He sought for shelter in the lew of the hill, plunging again into the mist. Finally, he found a hollow, and curled himself up on the wet grass. Clear of the fog, he had hunted feverishly for something, anything, that would burn—heather, sticks, the desiccated droppings of cattle. Nothing was there but grass, green and sopping.

Very little snow had fallen.

Huddled up in his hollow, Cherrington computed his chances. The war turned most men into fatalists. Waiting to "go over the top" two things presented themselves inexorably: death or life. Life might include cruel suffering if you happened to be wounded. The thought of suffering was abominable. Cherrington had not suffered unendurably when he was shot, but he had seen others

suffer. He reflected that death from cold and exposure was not painful. Unless help came to him before morning, he would become numbed by the cold, and fall asleep to awaken—where?

He believed with conviction in a life beyond this, an ampler, fuller life, upward and onward. He recalled a passage in a book of travel, which had impressed him with its symbolism. The traveller described vividly a curious change of scene and climate when crossing the Rocky Mountains into California. He had lifted the blind in his sleeping-berth to behold the grim peaks and canyons in mid-winter. Snow lay deep upon everything. Then he pulled down the blind and slept soundly. On waking he pulled up the blind again. The train was speeding through valleys; the sun shone in stainless skies; sheep and lambs were grazing in pastures enamelled with the brightest colours on Nature's palette. In a few hours the traveller had been whirled from hell into heaven.

And in the trenches he had consoled himself with this same reflection. If Fate so ordained it, he would pass from the battle-field to that Other Side, where so many comrades had gone. He was content to leave it at that. But then, as now, his mind dwelt persistently upon the past rather than on the present or future.

He lit another pipe, having, fortunately, plenty of tobacco. As the bowl warmed his fingers, he re-lived his life with Jess. Till this moment, when his physical energies were at a low ebb and his mind almost abnormally stronger and clearer, her personality had eluded him. What did she want?

what did she love? She loved life. But who, of mortal men or woman, could analyse life? What would life without him be to her? A husband ought to be able to answer such a question. And yet he couldn't. She might be like Miss Oldacre, that dear woman who had rested content with fame and the love of thousands.

From these musings he returned to himself and her, warming his heart, not his body, with intimate memories, all the beguiling feminine ways of her. They had never quarrelled. He could recall no blighting crass stupidities on either side. The friction of conflicting ambitions seemed to leave behind it an impalpable dust. To that dust all human ambition must resolve itself. His own particular ambition disintegrated, although he thought sadly but not bitterly: "I wish I could have seen my play done." But it was a play, nothing else. And it might not be produced.

What was he taking with him to the farther shore?

He answered the question honestly: love of his wife, the imperishable essence. Because he had loved her, he was ready to die. Humbly surveying himself, he knew that love had made him a better man, the self-imposed penance of ministration to another, exasperating at the time, had sweetened and sanctified his love. Such ministration sanctified the lives of myriads of women. In his case, service had been confined to one. Dimly he apprehended the potentialities of service, its inexhaustible powers of expansion. On the Other Side, service might engross the energies of all.

He wished, very regretfully, that his relations with his own family had been happier.

He dozed off, and woke with a start to find himself stiff and cold, hardly able to move. It was quite dark but the mist had lifted. A desperate struggle for life began. To lie down and die, like a sheep in a snow-drift, was ignominious. Tottering to his feet, he shouted till the muscles of his throat failed to act. He dared not leave his hollow. Presently he sank down, lying exhausted upon his back.

Above him some star twinkled.

Hope possessed him for the last time. It was not snowing, the wind had swept away the mists. Stout men might be looking for him, but he had heard no answering shouts.

With difficulty, he pulled out his matches and a large silk handkerchief. His clothes were damp and stiff with frost, but the handkerchief felt soft and dry. If he could walk to the top of Teign Head, light his handkerchief and wave it as a flaming beacon, it might be seen from afar.

He left the hollow, and staggered upwards. When he fell, he crawled on and on till he heard what he took to be the unmistakable throbbing of a cheap two-cylinder motor-car. He stopped in amazement. It was the throbbing of his own heart!

"I'm done," he thought.

He tied his handkerchief to his stick, crouched down with his back to the wind, and tried to light a match with fingers that, apparently, belonged to somebody else. His failure, at first, to accomplish so simple a task was the measure of his general

impotence. Ultimately he succeeded. The handkerchief caught fire. He stood upright, waving it frantically. The wind tore at the flaming silk. Dazed and giddy, he fell back upon the hill-side—he was far from the top—and wondered whether he had strength enough left to rip the lining from his coat and set that alight. To undress, to remove some undergarment, was beyond him. He made a hole in the lining. Slowly and laboriously he wrenched the soft stuff away, tied it to his stick, lit it, and waved it as before till the last spark was whirled into darkness.

And then, and not till then, he remembered that the stick would burn. At the thought of this, hope flickered again. Had he attempted to make a fire of his stick, the warmth from it would hardly have lasted more than a few minutes. Destiny was shaping his ends to what? Destiny so often seemed to be derisive, a cynical devil gibbering at its victims.

He found his knife and was unable to open it. Trying again and again, he had to fight fatigue in its most insidious form—lassitude. If he rested, he would fall asleep for ever. And this he positively yearned to do. He put his thumb into his mouth; it felt like a lump of ice. Slowly it thawed, and became a thumb again. He opened the knife.

His brain by this time was working intermittently. As he hacked at his stick, glimmering reasons asserted control. If men were searching for him, they would carry lanterns. He would have seen those lanterns. Staggering once more to his feet, he gazed about him. No tiny ray gladdened his eyes. He looked upward. The few stars had

vanished. Quite possibly the hill lay between himself and Fernworth Farm. Otherwise, surely he would descry some lighted window.

Anyway, he decided to wait a little longer, to prepare his beacon, and to set a match to it immediately after he discerned the first ray from a lantern.

But the moment came, all too soon, when he realised that he could not wait. Fatigue assailed him; hardly could he keep open his eyes, or lift his arms. He knew that he was being swept out of consciousness upon a Lethean tide.

He lit his beacon, and dared not hover over it, because his body might obscure the dancing flames.

And now, warmth meant nothing to him. He felt warm, perfectly comfortable.

Suddenly, feeling abandoned him. His heavy lids fell. Blind and deaf to external things, he seemed to be borne away upon the wings of the wind, to be dissolving into the elements.

IV

Jess received an answer from Godfrey Ambrose on the following morning. In a curt letter he expressed regret that she would not undertake a great part, and a pledge that his next production would be Cherry's play. She showed the letter, without comment, to Miss Oldacre, who surveyed her with alert eyes. After a pause, her friend said softly:

"I am glad—glad."

"Ah! you think I would have failed?"

"No; but this may be a greater triumph."

"I don't know—it might have been."

To evade questions, Jess left the room and the house. Her film work furnished a good excuse. When that was done, she meant to write to her husband, enclosing Ambrose's letter. A premonition of disaster possessed her. She believed more firmly than ever that Cherry's love had been forfeited, and she knew with even greater conviction that her love for him had increased immensely. She could compute the value of what she had lost.

At rehearsal, she acted so listlessly that the very clever young man who was directing operations led her aside :

"Are you ill, Miss Yeo ? "

"No."

"Bad headache, perhaps ? "

Jess shook her head. The young man shook her arm.

"Then buck up a bit, please. You mooned on just now. Everything is hung up whilst I'm talking to you. I'm not a fool. I can see that you've had a knock of sorts, but an actress, at the salary we're paying you, must earn it. No offence ? "

Slightly mortified, Jess began again not too successfully. The clever young man scowled and shrugged his shoulders, muttering to himself : "Oh, these women——!" However, he disdained further criticism, possibly aware that it would be wasted. Jess, he decided, looked obstinate. When the long morning's work was done, he said pointedly :

"I hope you will be feeling better to-morrow, Miss Yeo."

Jess hurried home, rubbing her fetters. For the

first time, a positive distaste of her profession left a bitter flavour in her mouth, which introspection failed to remove. It insinuated this conclusion.

"Once an actress, always an actress."

Accepting this as applicable to herself, Jess surveyed panoramically the bleak landscape of the future. Would she be able to act off the stage before her husband and her friends? Could she keep it up? She was supping that night at Sloden House; she would be expected to "twinkle," to look her best at any rate, to be lavish with smiles. Anything short of that would provoke questions and lies. The Duke, during Cherry's absence, had eyed her with whimsical interrogation. He seemed to be thinking: "Well, my pretty mummer, are you still a human being?"

She returned home to find a telegram on the hall table.

"Come at once. Mr. Cherrington is dangerously ill."

The telegram was signed by the landlady at Chagford.

Jess and Miss Oldacre left Waterloo for Exeter by the same train on which Cherry had travelled. Jess stared at the very spot where her husband had kissed her, regardless of the grinning porter. From the moment when she read the telegram, apathy had seized her. Miss Oldacre took the initiative, spoke to Orford over the telephone, and made all arrangements for the long journey. Very wisely, she attempted no platitudinous condolence. Hoping for the best, she believed, somehow, that the worst

had happened. The superstitious temperament of an actress suggested that the amazing luck of Jess had turned. Fortune, smiling, extending both hands, had vanished.

The great train swung out into the gathering shadows; the lights of London disappeared. Miss Oldacre had ordered a car to meet them at Exeter. They would arrive at Chagford before midnight. Jess, huddled up in her furs, remained silent. Her thoughts pursued each other round a vicious circle. Cherry had not come back to her, because he was ill. That explained everything. He had not spoken of his illness, because he wished to spare her anxiety. How like him!

If he died before she could tell him that she was wholly his——!

Every cell in her aching brain seemed to re-echo this fearful possibility, but she could not speak of it, because the mere putting of it into words was beyond her.

Of a sudden she realised that this was life—the life beyond the footlights which she had tried to ignore. Life included suffering; till now she had never suffered. At that moment, perhaps, she became a woman, born out of the pangs of the spirit. She knew that she wanted to be Cherry's wife, the mother of his children. If he died there would be nothing left of him except a memory.

Presently she refused food, affirming that she was unable to eat. Miss Oldacre said sharply:

"You may need every ounce of strength."

Jess, accordingly, choked down some sandwiches and drank a little wine. She wondered vaguely how

her understudy at Orford's theatre was acquitting herself. She would jump at this first chance, rejoicing in it. Joy had come to her through the misery of another. Anyway, the sands of the comedy were running out. Miss Oldacre spoke of an old woman who waited for just such another chance.

"She has not had it in five years," said the veteran. "Poor dear! She stalks grimly into my dressing-room, when I'm playing, and tells me that I look horribly tired and ill, but I go on—always."

"I couldn't have played to-night," declared Jess vehemently.

Miss Oldacre nodded. Soon she became silent, perceiving that Jess was not listening to her, lying back absorbed in thoughts not to be shared even with a friend.

She became conscious of an extraordinary detachment. Her own people, for example, were immensely remote. She loved her mother, and yet she told herself that she did not want her. Was this heartlessness? Had ambition swept her away from the humanities of life?

She listened to the song of the train, the rhythm of machinery, its throbbing pulsations, so inexorably regular. If a connecting rod broke, an appalling smash might take place, one of those catastrophes which are vividly described in the papers, and which, somehow, fail to excite the imagination of the reader for more than a few minutes or hours. The insistent question burned itself into her brain: "Am I going to be smashed?"

V

They found the motor awaiting them in the station yard at Exeter. Half-way to Chagford, climbing a steep hill, it stopped suddenly. The chauffeur tinkered with it for nearly five and twenty minutes. Something was amiss with the carburettor. Those lagging moments were hard to endure. The ladies could hear the chauffeur swearing to himself. When a violent exclamation escaped him, he apologised. Miss Oldacre said gravely :

"Don't apologise. I'm obliged to you for saying what I am thinking."

And then, apparently without reason, the carburettor did its duty ; the engine began to purr pleasantly. As Jess got into the car, she spoke to the chauffeur : "You can speed her up." The next moment, she remembered Miss Oldacre, and added quickly : "No, no. Go quietly."

Miss Oldacre kissed her.

"It was sweet of you, Jess, to think of an old woman."

They reached Chagford. The front door of the boarding-house, where Cherry lodged, was opened by the landlady, who was expecting them.

"Mr. Cherrington is no worse," she said.

The relief was so tremendous that Jess nearly fainted. Miss Oldacre gripped her, and together they followed the landlady into the sitting-room, where Jess saw, first of all, Cherry's typewriter with piles of script beside it.

Here, the story was told.

Cherry had lost his way on Dartmoor. When

he failed to return at the usual hour, tea-time, the landlady had become alarmed, the more so because the moorland mists had descended to the village. Thanks to her energy, a search party had been despatched to Fernworthy Farm. One of the men had seen a flare on Teign Head. Soon afterwards the night, although colder, had become clear. Cherrington was found, unconscious, and removed, first to the farm, and then to Chagford. But he had remained inanimate for nearly three hours. Life flickered back by degrees. His condition at the moment was critical. The doctor and the village nurse were with him. Everything humanly possible had been done.

When Jess saw him, he was unconscious of her presence. The doctor led her into another room.

"It's acute pneumonia."

"During the war, he was wounded in the lower part of one lung."

"These acute cases, Mrs. Cherrington, are common with children. Cold and exposure have affected both lungs. We restored animation with difficulty and within a few hours he was in a high fever—delirious."

When Jess suggested, hesitatingly, calling in a London specialist, he assured her that it was not necessary.

"Really it comes to this: the issue depends on the patient, not on the doctors. First and last it's a question of vitality. Constitutionally, Mr. Cherrington must be a strong man; otherwise he would have succumbed on the moor."

"How long is his condition likely to remain critical?"

She spoke calmly, but he saw that her fingers were trembling.

"The crisis comes in six or seven days. Much depends upon the wish to live, the subjective fighting instinct. In France I saw strong men drift out of life and weaklings recover. Life must be dear to your husband."

"I—I hope so," she faltered.

VI

Left alone, Jess asked herself if life was dear to Cherry. Why had he remained at Chagford? Tormenting doubts returned. Had he stayed away from her because of illness, she would have understood. But the landlady told her that he was in high health. The conclusion became inevitable. Freedom was dearer to him than his wife. Work ranked first.

She went back to Cherry's room after thanking the doctor, who promised to call early in the morning. A bed had been provided for Miss Oldacre. Jess looked at the nurse, a capable young woman from Exeter with quiet eyes and a resolute chin.

"What do you think, nurse?" she asked.

The nurse corroborated the statement of the doctor.

"He will pull through if he has strength reserves."

Jess looked at Cherry. Fever had reddened his cheeks. When he opened his eyes, they were brilliant, afire with vitality. But he seemed to be convulsed by a frequent hacking cough. Listening to that, the tears began to trickle down Jess's cheeks. The nurse touched her arm.

"Lie down, Mrs. Cherrington. You can't help. The disease must run its course. You may need your strength later. As you see, he doesn't know you. If he should recover consciousness, I will come to you at once."

Reluctantly, Jess went back to the sitting-room, where the landlady had left food and hot soup. The fire was burning well and a rug had been folded upon a sofa.

"I shall stay here," thought Jess.

She examined the room, noting Cherry's more intimate possessions, his pipes, his tobacco jar, and the pile of script upon the writing-table. A sentence or two caught her eye. Eagerly she glanced at other pages. . . . This was the play that he had begun for her before their marriage. It had been rewritten, almost finished. . . . As she read on feverishly, the message delivered itself. Every line revealed a labour of love. She understood. He had wanted to come back with this in his hand—a gift for her. She had enough experience to know that this work was finer and stronger than anything of his which she had read.

After some hours, the room seemed to be insufferably hot. Jess turned out the lamp and drew the curtains. The sun had risen. The village was awake. Reeks of smoke curled upwards out of grey chimneys. Opening the window wide, she inhaled the cold, vivifying air. Frost silvered the fields in front of her. Below, lay the lovely valley of the Teign; she could see the river meandering in and out of the trees.

Hearing a step, she turned to see the landlady coming through the door.

"What a view you have from that window."

"Yes; Mr. Cherrington said it was inspiring. He went over a small house near here with even a finer view than ours."

"Tell me," said Jess.

The landlady, a kind soul, eager to distract a miserable wife, plunged forthwith into a faithful recital of Cherry's sayings and doings. She protested that she had never "looked after" a nicer gentleman or one more easy to please. And he had fallen in love with Chagford, because never before, oh, never, had he done such fine work.

"Did he talk about his work to you?" asked Jess, with a twinge of jealousy.

"Oh, yes. You see, he had nobody else to talk to. A man must talk to somebody. When I wasn't there I heard him talking to the cat."

"But this place he looked at?"

The landlady described it and Cherry's enthusiasm, his desire to take it with a view, possibly, of buying it later on. Having a retentive memory she was able to repeat some of Cherry's phrases recognised as such by Jess.

"He said he could work here better than anywhere else."

"Did he?"

Was work—as Miss Oldacre had affirmed—the true justification of existence? She wondered what work meant to the landlady whom Cherry had described as a "decayed gentlewoman." In a soft voice she put the question.

"Work means more to men than to women, doesn't it?"

The landlady hesitated, looking at the questioner, reading, perhaps, in her soft, clear eyes, a real desire for the truth. She answered slowly and thoughtfully.

"I don't know. Work has been the saving of me. I've known better days, Mrs. Cherrington. But my husband died, leaving me with three children and very little money. It has been a true joy working for them."

"For them? I see. Joy comes, then, when we work for others?"

"I—I think so."

She bustled away. Jess went upstairs again. There was no change. At nine the doctor brought another nurse, who had arrived the night before. Jess pleaded experience as a V.A.D. But she had to admit ignorance of pneumonia.

"Is it caused by a bacillus?" she asked.

"Yes. Probably all of us, the healthiest, carry such organisms in our body. Any predisposing cause will arouse them to intense activity. When you were wired for, I anticipated heart failure, but the heart's action this morning is better, and the cough not quite so hacking."

"When is my husband likely to recover consciousness?"

"That depends entirely upon the fever. He may be delirious for several days."

Jess went to Miss Oldacre.

"I am not allowed to help. I can do nothing. And I want to do everything."

VII

An intolerable period of suspense followed. At intervals, during the week, Cherry became conscious, but, at these brief moments, he was too weak to be himself. He seemed to accept Jess—or so it appeared to her—apathetically, as he accepted nourishment. After the prostrating sweats, when the fever abated for a few hours, he lay, as if dead. Jess would sit beside him, staring at his pale face. What a noble head he had! What thoughts had possessed him as he confronted death upon the moor? He looked like a dying child. Laying her finger upon his wrist, she could barely detect the pulse. And he breathed with such difficulty that each faltering respiration seemed to be the last.

As the crisis approached, he grew more and more delirious. Jess, sitting beside him, heard her name again and again. But, to her misery, he always identified her as the actress in his play. Apparently, too, he measured accurately her disabilities. She heard herself analysed, dissected, acclaimed and disclaimed.

"You can't do that, old thing. I must make it easy for you. I must get you over. That line is beyond you. You won't feel it. How could you? Light stuff. That's what I'm after. You can't use your voice yet."

To Nan Oldacre, Jess repeated these disconnected utterances.

"He has revealed me to myself. I'm not an actress, only a mime. I can do what I'm taught

to do. If I could act as you act, I should be playing a part now, but, at last, I'm myself."

"That is the great thing," said Miss Oldacre. "If you have found yourself, Jess, don't worry."

"Light stuff!" she exclaimed.

One afternoon, Cherry transported her to the house which had smiled upon him as a perfect home. He led her through the rooms.

"This is our bedroom, dearest. It faces south. The sun will wake us. We shall drop off to sleep hearing the lullaby of the river. And this will be the nursery. Isn't it a dream cottage?"

"Not a dream, my darling, not a dream."

But he never heard her.

With intuition strung to extremest tension she divined from what was left unsaid by nurses and doctor that hope flickered about their lips, not in their minds. He would go and leave her—to what? When the landlady murmured a few words of sympathy, Jess replied fiercely:

"You have your three children."

She explored Chagford. At that season of the year the ubiquitous, blatant tripper was happily absent. Fearing to wander far from the house, she made acquaintance with the cottagers, peered wonderingly into simple lives. Craving for ministration, she found an opportunity for exercising it. A young mother was lying desperately ill within a stone's throw. The husband, during the day, was absent—at work, as a stonemason, some miles distant. Jess spent many hours in the cottage, playing nurse, housemaid, cook. It amazed her that she could play such parts.

"This is life," she told herself. "This is Pellie's fourth dimension."

VIII

The crisis passed.

But the doctor told Jess that his patient was still hovering between life and death.

"I want to be alone with him."

"Certainly, if you wish it."

The day nurse slipped out as she entered the room. Cherry seemed to be dozing. He lay upon his back, white and thin, a mere shadow of a man. Jess knelt down by the bed and prayed in a passion of supplication that if he had to go he might take with him the message she had to deliver.

The brief day was fading.

As she knelt, she held his hand, insensibly tightening pressure upon it. He was still immeasurably distant, as she besought him to come back.

Would he answer that call?

Dying people slipped unresistingly out of life, exhausted, weary, speechless. And she felt that he was sliding from her imperceptibly. Because of that, knowing human endeavour to be useless, doctor and nurse had left him.

"Cherry——!"

He sighed.

"Come back!"

He stirred, and was still again. His hand seemed to be lifeless. She kissed it, held it against her bosom, but it remained cold. In despair she flung herself upon the bed, clasped him to her, and entreated him to speak

He opened his eyes.

"I want you more than all the world. I love you. Do you understand? I never loved you till you left me. Do you know how I love you?"

"Dear little Jess."

He addressed her in a whisper, but she saw that he was coming back, that he recognised her. But the attenuated tones of his voice, so feeble, so like the voice of a child that is half awake, produced in her a passion of feeling and energy. Clutching him even more tightly, she spoke again:

"I have never loved you as I love you now. You have been desperately ill, do you know that?"

"Yes. I—I remember. The moor. I—I died."

"Cherry darling—you must live—live—live. For my sake, because I want you so."

He smiled faintly at her, nodding. Then his eyes closed. She thought that he had gone. Pulling down the bedclothes, she laid her ear against his left breast. His heart was still beating.

He was asleep.

She touched his forehead. It was moist and warm.

Not daring to move, she remained beside him till the nurse came back with a shaded lamp. Then, very gently, she disengaged herself. The nurse bent over him, her grave face relaxed.

"If he sleeps on like this, Mrs. Cherrington, all is well."

The night nurse relieved the day nurse. Jess remained at the bedside throughout that night. When dawn broke Cherry was still asleep.

IX

The doctor, before he awoke, told Jess that, humanly speaking, her prayer had been granted. Cherry had come back. But his convalescence, necessarily, would be long and tedious. He must live, as much as possible, in the open air, far from towns.

"Dartmoor nearly killed him," said Jess; "will Dartmoor make him strong again?"

The doctor was able to cite cases—phthisical cases—where Dartmoor had triumphed gloriously over Harley Street.

"We shall stay here," Jess announced.

"But—you are an actress, Mrs. Cherrington?"

"I was once, or I thought I was."

Cherry slept on for twenty-four hours. When he opened his eyes, he saw Jess smiling at him, but he had forgotten everything. He expressed surprise at seeing her. For a moment at least he hardly realised that he had been ill. Suddenly he perceived his hand, held it up, looked at it, and laughed.

"Funny, isn't it? I don't recognise my own hand."

After a long silence, he said in a stronger voice:

"But your work, Jess?"

"Ah! I have accepted a new and wonderful engagement, but we won't talk about that now. Aren't you hungry?"

"Very."

The nurse graciously permitted Jess to feed him. Immediately afterwards he fell asleep again.

"Can't you sleep, too, Mrs. Cherrington?" asked the nurse.

"If you promise to waken me when he wakes."

She undressed and went to bed. In a few seconds she was fast asleep in the next room. It will never be known whether or not Cherry awoke during the ten hours that followed. Under certain circumstances nurses do not regard promises as binding. Jess, eventually, awoke of her own volition to find that it was day, another and a brighter day. She slipped on a dressing-gown and hurried into Cherry's room. The nurse beamed at her.

"He has had a lovely night."

"When he wakes, will he be strong enough to hear some very good news?"

"Good news never hurts anybody, Mrs. Cherrington."

Jess went back to her bath, thinking for the first time since she left London of what she would wear, of how she would look. Miss Oldacre joined her presently, saying emphatically:

"Bless you! You are ten years younger this morning."

After breakfast, when she tapped gently at Cherry's door, he, not the nurse, said "Come in." She found him shaved, propped up in bed, white and thin, but—himself. The fact that he was so indisputably himself almost overwhelmed her. The nurse went out. Jess kissed him.

"I'm hungry for your kisses," he whispered.

She sat beside him, holding his hand, and he may have read in her clear eyes the writing inscribed by sorrow and fear upon her heart. Neither spoke, fearing, perhaps, to break so revealing a silence. From the tender pressure of her hand, gripping his.

he realised the truth. Pain had fused them together. After a long interval, Cherry said quietly :

" Tell me about your wonderful engagement, but, wait ! I can guess. Welfare has written his play for you."

" Guess again."

He shook his head. She touched his brow and his wrist, assuring herself that there was no trace of fever. Then she began slowly, smiling at him :

" I am going to play a big part."

" Ah ! You can do it."

" I think I can do it. I want to do it, Cherry, more than I can say. It means so much to me, this new part, that I'm afraid to talk about it even to you. Up till now, I have played girls' parts. Can you see me as a wife, as—a mother ? "

He closed his eyes, but immediately—terrified that any concentration of mind might be too great a strain—she kissed the lids.

" Open your eyes, darling. Don't worry ! Mr. Welfare has written his play for me, but I am not playing in it. I am going to play lead, but not in London."

" Back to the provinces ? Oh, dear ! "

He frowned, but she smoothed away the lines, still smiling, and placing her lips close to his ear.

" I am going to play Mrs. Cherrington. Do you understand ? I am so mad keen to play the part properly that I can think of nothing else. I am aching to begin. I—I have begun."

He understood. It was impossible to question the sincerity of her voice or the love shining in her eyes.

"You blessed woman! But, you are the big bread-winner. And I am rather knocked out."

"Cherry, you have written a great play."

He asked quickly: "Who says so?"

"Godfrey Ambrose. Mr. Wrest. Your play is accepted. It goes into rehearsal after Christmas. Everything is sealed, signed and delivered. Never, never again will you be spoken of as Miss Jessica Yeo's husband, and nobody in all the world is so proud and pleased as Mrs. Cherrington. Now, don't argue, or you may spoil my greatest triumph. You will get strong and well here. I'm afraid, Cherry, that you won't be able to rehearse your play. We shall be too busy getting down the 'props' for our little show."

"Props? Show?"

"Our furniture. Your doctor prescribes Dartmoor air. And I know, you know, of a tiny place near Chagford which is exactly right. We can sell the lease of the London house at a small premium. Pellie will attend to all that. And he can be trusted to produce your play."

He gasped out:

"But this means your leaving the stage?"

"I have left it, Cherry. There are only three sides to it, and, you see, I can't do without the fourth side—life. Father was right after all: we Yeos are not mummies. And in our stolid, obstinate way we know what we want. I want you."

She slipped her arms about him, laying her cheek against his. Her vitality seemed to infuse his weakened body. Doubt vanished. As he felt her heart beating against his, he knew that she was

asking him to enter with her into a fuller life, a real partnership independent of worldly ambition. Colour flowed into his pale cheeks. Strength seemed to come back, as he gripped her. His voice rang out—exultingly :

“ I shan't be long getting well, Jess.”

THE END

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